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## THE HEAD OF MEDUSA.



# THE HEAD OF MEDUSA.

BY

GEORGE FLEMING,

AUTHOR OF "A NILE NOVEL" AND "MIRAGE."

. . . doch fall ich unbesiegt, und meine Waffen  
Sind nicht gebrochen; nur mein' Herze brach!

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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## THE HEAD OF MEDUSA.

Book E.

A GIRL'S CHOICE—(*continued*).



## CHAPTER VII.

AND of course Lalli went. They were a party of seven or eight when they finally started—Mrs. Damon and Mr. Floyd in a carriage by themselves. It was a warm gray day ; from time to time the flickering tempered sunlight gleamed through the softly unquiet mass of clouds ; wherever the wild soft wind parted that silvery radiance the sky seen through these rifts was of the faintest blue.

There is, properly speaking, no beginning

of spring on the Roman Campagna. In September the land lies dying—a blank expanse, fever-stricken, burnt to the heart, and very still. The skies are paler above it ; the earth is cracking in long shuddering gaps ; the blanched lines of aqueduct seem more than ever organic—the natural culmination of the desert—and there is no coolness in their heavy shadow. The shepherds have gone to the hills ; and the few horsemen who pass here at long intervals ride by muffled in cloaks, pallid-faced, and shivering in the sun. An implacable hungry-eyed spectre sits crowned and solitary among these ruins ; the blood-red sunsets do him tribute ; a pæan of unclean triumph rises in his honour, hoarse and ceaseless, from the pestilent pools of the Pontine Marsh ; and

at night the monotonous creak of the cicala's voice is like the dry persistent delirium of a fevered thirst.

The land dies, but in the night there is resurrection. The full autumnal rains sweep down in wild white gusts, with sighing winds—stern white-winged angels of deliverance—born of the sea and mountains. A hundred small green lives awaken in the sheltered side of ruins; the earth grows ruddy; in December the strong-lipped daisies are red and white everywhere beneath the stubble of last year's asphodel. This same stubble is the surest measure of the passing seasons. On the coldest tramontana day, when the blue of the sky is hard like enamel, when the sheep huddle closer together, and the immutable ilexes writhe,

dark and desperate, in the icy clutch of the wind, these bare delicate stalks are like a warm rosy flush running above the foldings of the ground. Flowers are continually springing up beneath this ghostly shelter—small pale crocuses, blue-veined and low ; yellow marigolds ; and strangely-coloured orchids, dull in hue and faintly perfumed, like the grotesque tenement of a beautiful soul. By the end of January, when the warmer rains have washed these mouldering stems into the pale brown earth, the violets are blooming everywhere in the villas, and out here, on this perfumeless waste, a yellow mist of delicate wild turnip-flowers bends and dances in the wind. In another week or so the first almond-tree will blossom palely behind some sheltered convent wall ; already

the Campagna has lost its noble monotone of colour ; the long lifting lines of plain are green beneath the grayer olives of the hills ; the sweet impatience of the flowers stars all the lanes and hedgerows while yet the trees are budding, and the white foam of blossoms breaks over a summery land and beneath a summer sky.

As they rode down to Ostia this morning it was difficult to say precisely when and where this demarcation of the seasons had been overpast. There were rose-red peach-trees clustering against the gray walls of the city ; the small young leaves overhead were of a pale shining green ; the fragrant freshness of early morning blew in their faces as they trotted sharply along over the soft damp ground.

And now they had walked their horses down the hill by the Basilica, and saw the river running broadly between low-lying fields. The empty road followed the lonely Tiber. The larks sang all about them in the meadows, and the delicious floating odour of wild-growing plants ("that comes and goes like the warbling of music") was on the air. It was a day for all delicate effects of colour. Once—the wind had loosened the clouds, the gray vapour floated languidly against a sky of pale and limpid blue—they passed a solitary shepherd, a Campagna shepherd, dressed in rough skins, and leaning on his staff. All about him his sheep were feeding in the transparent shadow of a cloud, while beyond them, to the river's verge, the fields were afire with yellow

marsh flowers—a resplendent sea of gold. And once, looking down a wet and narrow lane, crowded, as far as one could see, with a huddled flock of sheep, the sunlight touched the woolly backs to a winding silvery streak ; on either side brown banks, and overhead the delicate shining stems of poplar-trees. It was an impression like listening to the sound of flutes—clear, thin, silvery, evanescent.

Barbara had checked her horse for an instant, lingering behind the others to look at this ; when she turned her head Hardinge was waiting for her.

“ Do you think that they are standing so expressly for your pleasure ? ” he said, smiling at the look of delight that was shining in her eyes. “ Miss Floyd, I know that you

are possessed by a perfectly irrational desire to give that man something. You are conspiring against the fundamental rule of good government ; you are establishing an arbitrary system of rewards. Admit, now, that you have been regretting that you had not your purse with you ?”

“ Well——” began Barbara, looking down and playing with the reins between her fingers.

Hardinge laughed.

“ Fortunately Lexeter is out of sight. Political economy is supposed to be my strong point at Oxford, Miss Floyd.” He took some loose silver from his pocket and tossed it cleverly enough into the shepherd’s hat. “ And there is nothing like acting up to one’s principles,” he said.

Why is it that some casual look or tone will fix itself upon the memory until that and that only will grow to represent the person who uttered it? Barbara had met this young man a dozen times already, but she never forgot his look as he spoke those few careless words—the kindly look in his eyes as he turned in his saddle with the sun and the wind in his face.

A big white cloud floated by overhead and covered them with its shadow. Beyond, the larks were singing in the sunny water-meadows. The horses stamped impatiently upon the soft earth, and fretted and pulled at their bridles.

“Shall we ride on?” Hardinge suggested. They began speaking of England, then of Oxford.

“I shall go back there in the autumn to take my degree,” Hardinge said; “and then I go home. It is four years since I left America.”

“Then you will not come back to Rome again,” she said, a slight touch of disappointment crossing her mind at the idea.

“I don’t know. I am like Adam after the fall. The world is all before me where to choose,” he made answer, smiling and touching his horse’s neck with the end of his whip. “My habits lie here; only it is an article of faith with me to go home.”

“After Oxford?”

“Ah, that was a mistake undoubtedly. One stands over on this side and listens,

and one is fairly deafened by the clamorous culture of America. And then your true American never admits superiority, which would naturally seem to exclude oneself. And yet," he said, looking at her again, "I fancy they will make a place for me."

"But what are you going to do, really?"

"Oh, reform the universe."

"I do not see any particular reason why you should not be successful," said Barbara, with an answering smile.

"I see none myself. Lexeter would say that therein lies the essence of all failure. I disagree with him."

"Oh, but you will not fail," she said rather earnestly. "I don't mean about reforming the world and all that, but in whatever you

attempt to do. I think there are some people who are born so. They are in harmony with the world from the beginning. That is why they are useful—and delightful," she added quite simply.

"And you yourself; which planet do you belong to, Miss Floyd?"

"Oh, I am out of tune very often. Incompatible things attract me, and I am always surprising myself by finding out the necessity of what I did not mean to do. And then other people call you inconsistent."

"Ah yes; those terrible other people," said Hardinge quietly. "I think I shall begin by suppressing *them*. Not that I exactly agree with you about them. I understand what you mean, but I never could see why it should be such a source of misery to

be out of harmony, as you call it, with the ideas which influence Tom, Dick, and Harry. The whole object of life does not seem to me to be cohesion, and the advancing of business. Really, unless one is a predestined muff, I do not see why the fact that all one's neighbours are out of sympathy with one should not tell chiefly against one's neighbours ? I am tired of social cement, and the rubbish that is talked about the enthusiasm for humanity. If I see a man in trouble and help him, why is that not enough ? I don't see why his claim upon my benevolence is to interfere in any degree with my right to consider him a fool."

He looked at her again. He saw her face in profile. The sun was shining upon her delicate cheek and lips, and on the soft fine

hair at her temples. She wore a low-crowned felt hat which gave her something of the air of a young boy.

“I know that you do not agree with me,” he said.

They were walking the horses up a little hill. It was at the edge of the wood, the larks were still singing by the river in the flat sunny meadows, but near at hand an indistinct humming sound, the voice of insects, the dry tapping of bare branches, and the rustle of small leaves rose about them. There was a sudden smell of the earth and the warm heavy odour of beds of young fern in the sun.

“I do not see the use of living unless one can care for the people about one,” said Barbara a little slowly. Her eyes were cast

down, and she was apparently examining the buckle of her reins.

“I did not say one was not to care for people. I draw the distinction between people and their opinions. And I do not see how life could not be worth the wear and tear to one's temper of living. Why, merely as a naturalist, one would find humanity interesting,” said Hardinge, smiling. He looked about him and took off his hat and let the wind blow upon his resolute sun-browned face. “And there is all this beside,” he said, glancing around him comprehensively. They were drawing nearer to Ostia. From the crest of the hill they overlooked a waving expanse of reeds—the first indication of the Marsh. To the left, that dark matted line of tree-tops was the beginning of the Castle

Fusano woods. On the right a tall gray tower rose, bare and solitary, above the crowded and sterile life of the Marsh. They looked across the tangled tops of a forest of brushwood, of myrtle chiefly, and phillyrea, bay-trees, and here and there a stunted ilex, its branches dragged and bowed by the salt winds of many winters—a mass of grays and ruddy browns streaked and spotted with green. Beyond that, low at the horizon, was a still and glittering sea. The round massive outline of the castle of Ostia rested heavily against this motionless field of light.

It was only for a moment, then they re-entered the wood. They rode on. They joined the others of the party. Lexeter had some white narcissi in his hand.

“They are the first I have seen this year,” he said, and gave them to Barbara.

“Thanks !”

She put them in her dress and looked down at them, and touched the white stars softly with her fingers. Lalli was watching her from the other side of the road. He had a curious expression on his face which struck Barbara the instant she looked at him. She turned her head to speak to him, and felt suddenly embarrassed.

“Count Lalli——” she said.

He checked his horse abruptly, hesitated, and then brought him across the road.

“You wanted me ?”

“Oh, it was nothing particular,” said Barbara quickly. She heard Hardinge’s voice behind her, and, a moment after,

Octave's laugh. They were not ten yards away from her, but she had all the sensation of being irrevocably excluded. "Are you—are you tired? Are not these flowers lovely?" she said, putting up her hand to the white blossoms in her breast.

Lalli stared at her fixedly for a moment, and the same singular contraction passed over his features.

"So that is what you wanted?" he said abruptly.

He laughed, and threw back his head. His nostrils quivered and whitened. "I am not a judge of flowers. Ask Mr. Lexeter," he said indistinctly between his clenched teeth. She hardly understood the words, but there was no mistaking the look which he threw at her as he turned sharply about

and struck his spurs into his horse. The animal was a quiet enough Roman hack, not unaccustomed to strange theoretic riding, but this was surely a more wanton affront than usual. Lalli was an exceptionally good horseman, but for a minute or two there was a very pretty little struggle for mastery upon the stones of the sunny causeway.

“What the deuce! steady there, Miss Damon! Shall we charitably imagine that our Italian friend has gone mad? or what is the meaning of this piece of circus riding, Miss Floyd;” said Hardinge, riding up to her with a smile.

“I don’t know,” said Barbara quickly. Her eyes were cast down. Her face was quite pale.

They were entering the Marsh. A paved road stretches straight and white across it. The blue-green reeds rose straight and sharp, like an army of spears, as far as the eye could see. At the first glance the plain presented the aspect of a solid field of rushes ; looking more closely, one was aware of openings in this greenness—the sunlight glittered upon water, and the mind realised with a shock that all this thick-set show of verdure is in fact the merest covering for the lagoon. Denuded of vegetation, the Stagno would be desolate ; in its pestilential luxuriance it becomes terrible. The hidden water suggests treachery. In the midday silence there are inexplicable disturbances—quick sudden darting and struggling deep down under cover of the rushes—dumb in-

dications of strange and repulsive forms of life—the life of slime and obscurity and secrecy. The mind follows these furtive movements with a fascinated disgust, imagining all curious tragedies of lower creations—wild crippled sea-birds dragging themselves painfully about under shelter—fierce battle for existence between snake and frog and newt.

At midday this expression of a crowded sterility is at its highest. In the early morning there are mists hanging about the horizon ; at sunset a whiter exhalation rises slowly, the chill forerunner of fever and slow death ; darkness covers it ; at night the stars are reflected in a thousand motionless pools. But at midday the Marsh asserts itself. In the perfectly clear air the

straight reeds glitter like sword-blades with a pitiless distinctness. The sea is silenced. The dim sunlight presses heavily down upon an absolutely changeless form of desolation. In the winter these reeds will be stiff and dry, blanched and rattling in the restless sea-wind. All the power of the summer can only modify their colour to a barren bloom. In a hundred years the Marsh will not have altered by an inch. The whole character of the waste implies immutability. The handful of peasants, half-naked and silent, toiling along that sand-bank to the right, are workers in the salt mines founded by Marcus Antius twenty-five centuries ago. That blanched and solitary tower is the campanile Dante chose as resting-place for weary shades

waiting to be ferried over to the melancholy shores of Purgatory. The hoarse lugubrious croaking of the frogs rises eternally like the malign rejoicing of all the lower powers of evil over this barren fulfilment of some primeval curse.

For a few steps outside the town there were shattered capitals of columns, fragments of headless statues lying among the thistles by the road. They went in under a massive stone gateway all covered over with deeply-carved scutcheon and device. There was a bare paved courtyard inside, and a small and unpromising inn. The horses' feet clattered noisily over the stones ; an old woman came and looked at them out of an upper window, and pulled the rude shutter close with a bang. They were

so near the battlemented tower of the castle they could distinctly distinguish the slight stirring of the wind among the stiff blue-green masses of wormwood crowning the bastion. Nothing else seemed alive in all the desolate place.

They had all dismounted; the horses were standing together with drooping heads. Lalli alone had remained in the saddle; he was taking his horse up and down a short bit of the road, putting him through all his paces, and apparently deriving some pleasure from the restive resistance he met with.

“What is Count Lalli doing?” asked Octave, innocently pulling off her glove.

The two young men looked at each other and did not answer.

“I thought that we were to meet mamma and Mr. Floyd ?”

“Oh, they have gone on to the woods with the trap, and the luncheon too, worse luck.”

“Just look after those horses, Lexeter, there's a good fellow. We shall have them all imitating that idiot out there before we know where we are,” said Hardinge in a low voice. He walked over to the stable-door and looked in. “Hallo ! I say, wake up there, can't you ? I'll be hanged, Lexeter, if there are not two stablemen in here, and the beggars fast asleep.”

“And what comes next ? Are there not ruins or something ?” said Octave, gaily rolling up her gloves together and tossing them into the air like a ball. “It is really

a most dreadful spectacle to see you lose your temper in that way, Mr. Hardinge. Why should not stablemen sleep ? *I* should—I should sleep all day long if I were living in this awful place ; and then I suppose you would be enraged at me ? ” looking at Hardinge with a sudden dimple in each cheek. She rose from the stone on which she had been sitting, and flicked some dust from her habit with the end of her whip. “ And oh Barbara, what would you give for a drink of milk—delicious cool new milk—before we start ? ” she said.

The ruins of the old town are at a distance of some ten minutes’ walk down the road. They strolled there leisurely across a low grassy plain. The temperate sunshine filled the air with a pleasant warmth, they

crushed wild thyme beneath their footsteps as they sauntered idly over the short warm grass ; the wind tasted salt upon their lips, blowing across the wide-mouthed Tiber from the sea. They came upon the paved and shadowless street ; on either hand low brick-built houses ; there were flowers and small green plants growing in the crevices, and shy brown lizards basking upon the sunny stones, worn into deep ruts from the long pressure of old chariot wheels. At the end of each street was the same expanse of brown river, low horizon, and flat and empty marsh.

The soft white clouds floated by overhead against a sky of summer blue. It was a day for lying down on grassy plains, for idle talk, and the satisfaction of living in the sun. They

had wandered down through many ruined courts to the foot of a small open-air altar. Octave seated herself upon its lower step. She took off her hat, the wind ruffled her curly hair upon her forehead, she threw back her head and her delicate throat and chin looked more flower-like than ever against that background of gray stones.

“I suppose you know that that was one of the altars to Pan. Some fellow was telling me about having been down here when they uncovered the mosaic inscription,” said Lexeter lazily, clasping his hands behind his head.

“You mean Davids, I suppose?” said Hardinge, glancing at Octave.

He picked up a small glittering fragment of glass grown iridescent from long

burial, turned it over curiously in his hand for a moment, and threw it carelessly at the nearest lizard. It fell wide of its mark and struck Barbara lightly on the wrist. She started and looked up.

“I beg your pardon,” the young man said smiling; “I did not mean to begin stoning you. It is an appropriate place for a martyrdom; but I did not mean to make a martyr of you.”

“St. Monica died here,” said Octave, smelling at a flower. “I’ve seen a picture of her at Ostia; or a print.”

“You mean Ary Scheffer’s picture. St. Monica and St. Augustine sitting at ‘a curtain window’?” said Lexeter. “I know it. Ary Scheffer is a bore.”

“Mr. Lexeter!”

“I will tell you something better than that. All the great Roman expeditions sailed from here. Scipio Africanus—I always thought he was a little like you, Hardinge—started from Ostia for Spain. I believe he started from those very steps where Miss Floyd is sitting.”

“Of course,” said Barbara, lifting up her clear eyes and smiling at him.

“And Cæsar Borgia—am I right in saying that there are traits in common between him and Lexeter ?”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it, old fellow. Cæsar Borgia was imprisoned in the castle over there. I wonder how he liked it ?” said Hardinge ; “I was sorry he never left us his opinion of the Marsh. It reminds me of

him," the young man said, turning his eyes towards the flat and shining fen.

"A pleasant suggestion for Mr. Lexeter!"

"Oh, those fifteenth-century fellows had the pull over us in one thing. At least they were individualities," said Lexeter, pulling his hat down over his eyes; "and they knew exactly what they wanted. It is a great privilege to be born unscrupulous. We don't do that sort of thing well nowadays. Modern unscrupulousness is merely vulgarity—the hankering after other people's goods and chattels; or brute selfishness. At the best our mental freedom is purely relative, bounded on all sides by religious fragments and traditional ditches—like horses turned out in a paddock to graze until it is time to put them into harness. I know

there is Hardinge, for instance, who has all sorts of ideas about moral independence, and all that kind of thing. Wait! Some day, some woman or other will come to the gate of the paddock with a neat little halter; up trots Hardinge, hereditary instincts and all, and the end of that man——”

“Is worse than the beginning? Wait!” said Hardinge cheerfully, looking up at Octave with a smile. “I may turn out as untractable as Count Lalli’s refractory steed.”

“Ah poor Cesco! But I wonder what has become of him, you know,” said Octave, with her quick transparent blush.

“You see—I know very well you don’t agree with me—but don’t you see yourself how this morbid modern scrupulousness

runs through every act and feeling, and spoils the more impulsive part of it? Why, take those two lines of Matthew Arnold," said Lexeter, turning to Barbara; "don't you remember, where he is telling the girl that he loves how

A sea rolls between us  
Our different past?

Now is there any mood one can understand more easily? Have we not, each one of us, experienced it at one time or another? It is perfectly sincere sentiment. But will you try to imagine what a Cæsar Borgia, what a fifteenth-century Italian, would have made out of that? And take the commonest everyday experiences. Suppose—suppose a man wants to marry a girl, and has no money. Of course men without money are

a blunder, upon the face of things; we all know that. But hath not a Jew also feelings?"

"But I thought Jews *always* had money," said Octave, arching her delicate eyebrows and looking at him.

Hardinge laughed. A cloud passed over the sun. He took off his hat and threw it down beside him on the short thyme-sweetened grass.

"I must say I agree with you there, Lexeter. The tendency is to complicate things quite unnecessarily. Imagine, for instance—well, let us say marrying a foreigner; a representative of alien traditions and influences. Can you not conceive how, after a while, all the little variations which attracted one would come to symbolise

the most dividing differences? I never could marry any woman—not in spite of your neat little allegory, Lexeter—no woman, no, not if I adored her,” the young man said, laughing; “no woman who had not associations with the rhymes of Mother Goose.”

It was the mere idle talk of a summer day. Barbara sat listening to it, pulling the short grass up by its roots and looking at it before she threw it away.

“Ah, there is Count Lalli at last. The horse is conquered,” said Octave suddenly, lifting up her head.

They could see him a long distance off—a tall dark figure crossing the solitary plain. He came straight towards the spot where they were resting. For some reason they

were all silent. A large gray-winged sea-bird flew by overhead.

“That is not a gull, surely?” said Hardinge, following it with his eyes.

The sound of Lalli’s firm footstep and the click of his spurs were distinctly audible as he strode down the narrow sunny street. For one moment it seemed as if he would pass them.

“We are here,” said Barbara, rising and looking at him across the crumbling partition wall.

It was as they were walking across the fields on their way to Castel Fusano that Lalli asked her to let him speak to her alone for a few minutes. He made the request with a constrained formality which could not fail to surprise her.

“But I will speak to you whenever you like,” she said at once, looking at him rather anxiously with her grave and beautiful eyes. “Surely you remember that we are friends?”

He made no answer. They were crossing the grass-grown bridge which leads over the last arm of the Stagno. He turned his head aside and looked down at the treacherous sluggish water. A thousand discordant voices rose harshly from the confines of the Marsh. When at last his glance met hers she was struck with the extreme pallor of his face.

## CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. DAMON and Mr. Floyd had driven onward to the wood, after a very brief pause, with something of the fatalistic resignation characteristic of the American parent.

“ I hope Octave will not be too tired, I’m sure. It was very foolish of her to ride—very. She is quite certain to over-exert herself,” Mrs. Damon remarked rather plaintively, putting up her hand to pat her smooth dark hair, and looking with dark and melancholy eyes at her companion. The carriage was standing before the small inn door.

They had met no one on the road down here, and that road had been dusty ; the sun was hot. The country had the power of irritating Mrs. Damon. She was secretly conscious of annoyance against this stupid iteration of meaningless hedgerow and field.

“ I quite envy you your—your unconcern about poor dear Barbara,” she said, a trifle sharply. “ And so popular as she is with the gentlemen too. I’m sure Count Lalli is most devoted. It is most gratifying, of course. And perhaps I am foolish, and it is only a *mother’s* anxiety——”

She stopped short and lifted her flexible eyebrows. “ But dear Barbara is very attractive, of course. So clever,” she added hastily. She smiled in an embarrassed sort of way, and passed her handkerchief across

her lips. “I think I will go upstairs for a moment. I daresay these people can give me a room where I might wash my hands and get rid of a little of this dust?” she murmured almost inaudibly.

“Allow me to assist you,” said Mr. Floyd slowly, turning his large pale face blankly upon her, and offering her his hand. He stood, leaning against the carriage-door, biting his nails absently; turning his quick keen glance from time to time upon the men busied about the horses, while she toiled up the narrow stair. “How could I have been so stupid?” she asked herself with a half-frightened half-amused look. “I shall tell Octave. What! have you no better room than this, my good woman? Go and fetch me some hot water then.

Mind, not tepid water ; hot," she said, sinking languidly down upon the vacant chair, and looking about her with an expression of some curiosity and contempt at the small and not over-clean room. There was a highly-coloured counterpane on the dubious bed. An equally-brilliant lithograph of Our Lady of Sorrow hung by the window, simpering placidly above the seven wounds. By a bold metaphor the artist had represented the Madonna's eyes of a vivid purple. Their gaze seemed to follow Mrs. Damon's movements about the room as she slowly adjusted herself before the glass. That dim cracked surface had apparently the power of insinuating new wrinkles. She took off her hat, and looked at herself close and anxiously until the muscles grew

strained, the lines deepened, about her mouth and eyes. She smiled at her own reflection, but her great hollow eyes never lost that look of sombre anxiety. She rested her chin upon her hand.

“So old already!” she said with a half-inaudible sigh.

Something like a look of terror passed over the pretty, faded, foolish face.

The next moment she started and looked hastily around at the abrupt entrance of the padrona.

“Why—why don’t you knock before coming into people’s rooms?” she asked with some asperity.

The Italian woman looked at her calmly, almost indifferently. She was a strongly-built young peasant woman of perhaps thirty.

“There is your hot water,” she said.

“We have none hotter.”

She set the jug down upon the table, and folded her arms contemplatively, and stood gazing at Mrs. Damon with the deliberate scrutiny of a curious animal. Her bony hands, curved and flattened by hard labour, hung down in an irresolute way from her wrists.

“Where are the towels? I suppose you have towels,” said Mrs. Damon presently.

“Certainly. We have towels.”

“Then go and get me some—instantly,” the widow said petulantly. It was only habit which kept her from stamping her foot. “Oh dear,” she said helplessly, “I wish Octave were here with me.”

The flies buzzed noisely and incessantly

against the ceiling. She could hear Mr. Floyd's voice in the courtyard giving an order to the coachman.

“The gentleman wishes to know if you would like to wait here for the other signori ?” the woman asked, coming back with a towel over her arm.

“Certainly not.”

Mrs. Damon hesitated a moment. She looked about her, she put her hand in her pocket and drew out a small ivory box of rice-powder and a dainty pink silk puff. She powdered her cheeks carefully, looked at herself, put on her hat again and gave a little nod.

“I suppose you wonder what I have been doing ! Ladies have to do that, you know, otherwise their faces would get quite black

in the sun," she explained graciously, turning to the peasant with a half apologetic smile.

The woman laughed stolidly, and Mrs. Damon felt her cheeks reddening suddenly under all their careful artificial bloom.

"But these people are terrible, quite brutalised, I assure you," she said to Mr. Floyd, picking her way daintily across the stones to the carriage-step. She was rested and refreshed, her spirits rose with the sensation of comfort. She talked pleasantly to her companion. The carriage-wheels rolled noiselessly over the soft grassy lane. She looked with approval on either hand at fields of yellow marshy bloom. The short forest turf stretched without a break to the very doorstep of the Chigi shooting-lodge. Single

pine-trees, straight-stemmed and tall, rose from the grass. Mild white oxen fed slowly in the sunshine, or stepped together with patient strength, dragging huge loads of wood. The crack of their driver's whip sounded long after they had disappeared from sight among the trees. And across the clearing rose the forest, a goodly army of tall pines, dark serried trunks, and deep uplifted murmurous crowns of shade. There were yellow daffodils in the sunlight in the moist meadow where the oxen were feeding.

“They never do attack one, I suppose ?” Mrs. Damon suggested rather nervously, glancing doubtfully at the formidable curve of their horns.

Mr. Floyd turned his face slowly towards her. He pushed his hat to the back of his

head and pressed his finger-tips together in an attitude of attention.

“ You were speaking of Barbara a short time ago ; if I am correct in my impression, I gathered from your remark the idea that this young Count Lalli——”

“ Oh, but you must not expect me to reveal young ladies' secrets,” said Mrs. Damon promptly, poking at the grass with her parasol and then shaking her head at him playfully. “ What I know is only what a little bird has whispered to me ; and it is a little bird that never speaks to gentlemen.”

“ Perhaps Miss Octave——”

“ Now, Mr. Floyd, as if these poor dear children were not to be allowed to have their own little secrets ! Why, when I was a girl——” She looked down, and

fingered her dress with a conscious smile.  
“My little bird never reveals secrets to gentlemen.”

“Well, well!” said Mr. Floyd, looking down at the ground with a sigh. He drew out his cigar-case automatically, and then restored it quickly to his pocket. The old southern planter never smoked before “the ladies.” He did not avail himself now of Mrs. Damon’s permission, putting aside her entreaties with a formal wave of his hand. As the party of the young people approached them Barbara was walking beside Count Lalli. Mr. Floyd sighed again as he looked at his daughter. She came up to him and took hold of his arm.

“Are you tired, papa? Have we kept you waiting?”

But he only turned away his head. "It is to Mrs. Damon you must all make your apologies," he said slowly.

"There are no depths of humility to which I will not descend for the sake of getting some luncheon, Mrs. Damon; I place myself unrestrictedly at your mercy," said Hardinge, laughing and throwing himself down on the grass at the widow's feet.

She smiled; turning upon him a full cordial look of liking, which seemed at once to remember and include everything about him—his family, his social standing, his personal appearance—within the same measure of approval. Mrs. Damon was always more enthusiastic in her judgments than her daughter. For one thing, she was physically much stronger; she knew nothing

by experience of the feeling of intense lassitude, the silent distaste of the effort of daily life, which was common experience to Octave. The strong caressing affection between mother and daughter existed quite independently of any such mental familiarity. There was nothing in this fact to disturb their intercourse. There is perhaps one mind in a hundred in which a vivid interest in the ornaments and futilities—the ribbons and trimmings—of life, cannot coexist with a depressing conviction of the insignificance of existence viewed as a whole. Octave was indisputably far stricter in the observance of religious formulæ than her mother, Mrs. Damon being at times guiltily conscious of many shortcomings in the matter of attending early service and general church

discipline in Lent. It was Octave who superintended all details of housekeeping in their small and dainty *ménage*, and who from time to time was subject to cautious remonstrance, for the widow was fond of a good table. Outwardly, indeed, she submitted without a murmur to much severity of decision on the part of the young neophyte; consoling herself possibly with reflecting vaguely that such keenness for self-sacrifice was not destined to survive any lengthy experience of matrimony. Religious restrictions which extended to the ordinary and familiar days of the week were like rigid rules laid down for hours of work or the practising of music—something only permissible in a household of women, and where the comfort of “the gentlemen” was

not concerned. Nine years ago such ideas were still possible in the minds of attractive-looking women, moving gracefully and with recognised success through life, looking with an agreeable feeling of superiority and contempt upon their more unsatisfied sisters, and deducing infallible condemnatory opinions of social agitators from the objectionable character of their dress.

It was not until after luncheon that any one proposed walking to the seashore. The afternoon light threw long slanting shadows from the wood ; the gray walls of the solitary castello had lost something of their forbidding aspect ; even the grotesque Saracen's heads, carved in stone long years ago, when life was more episodic in character, and the peremptory visit of seafaring ma-

rauders a distinctly possible experience— even these timeworn defenders seemed to lose something of their grimness under the delicate persistent warmth of the March sun. Their half-human gaze followed the party of young people to the green and mysterious entrance of the wood. A straight wide road, paved with huge blocks of lava, has cleft the forest to the shore. For a mile the bare undeviating causeway runs straight forward as an arrow's flight, piercing the deepest recesses of the pines—cool fragrant places where the bright cyclamen grow in the sand, under thickets of sturdy laurel; and there is abundance of wild blue rosemary and the white moon-faced laurustinus flower—all wild, strong, close-petalled, blossoming things, “born of the sea and the bright day.”

It was still early ; the shadows fell but softly across the causeway ; the whole wood seemed penetrated with a feeling of lightness and spring warmth ; there was delicate pleasure in the tempered touch of the sun. In the quiet afternoon light the tall plumy softness of the Mediterranean heath glimmered palely among the sombre trees ; the forest was full of its fragrance, mingling with the warmer scent of the pines ; down far green glades they could see its branches softly waving like the beckoning hands of the white-armed dryads of the wood.

It was an afternoon for much delightful leisure. “The kind of afternoon which makes one believe in Boccaccio,” Hardinge said, throwing his head back lazily to watch the slanting flight of a sea-hawk across the

fringe of pines. “I should feel it an anachronism to wish for a gun ; but there is a capital shot to be had, you know, at that fellow.”

They had left the wood behind them, and crossed the high bare dunes. The tide was coming in silently ; there was no belt of rock to vex the water into resistance. The flat shore was stretched defenceless before the glittering, creeping, restless sea. At some little distance a small low hut made a black spot of shadow on the sands.

“I wonder what that place can be—if anyone lives there ?” asked Barbara idly. She looked up, and her eye happened to catch Lalli’s glance.

“Were you speaking to me ?” he said, looking at her rather fixedly. “You must

pardon my not answering ; I do not understand English."

"Oh," said Barbara, flushing ; "I beg your pardon. It was very stupid of me to forget."

"Is that the only thing you have forgotten, then ?" asked Lalli quickly. He turned his face as he spoke towards Octave, who was saying :

"It really is entirely Mr. Hardinge's fault, who pretends that he can only speak French to one person at a time."

"The French plurals are so irregular," said Hardinge calmly. "All foreign tongues should be reserved for a *tête-à-tête*, where the interests are identical."

"Nonsense ! *Mais quant à moi, comte, je vous demande mille fois pardon.*"

"*Mais, mademoiselle, je vous en prie——*"

Barbara had been quite silent. She looked up now.

“I was only asking you about that house over there,” she said, pointing with her hand. She hesitated for an instant, as Lexeter observed. “I think I should like to walk down there. Will you walk with me?” she said.

The three left behind were silent for a moment. Miss Damon looked at her companions. “I don’t think that you are a great admirer of—of Italians, Mr. Lexeter?” she suggested demurely.

“On the contrary, I admire an infinite number of Italians. It is not my fault, surely, that they are all in their graves?” said Lexeter, smiling a little at her pretty look of mischief.

“ And of course, Count Lalli being a living contemporary——”

“ He is certainly a fine-looking fellow,” said Lexeter quickly, glancing at the tall soldierly figure crossing the sands. He saw Barbara stand still for a moment ; her companion bent forward as if to pick up something which had been dropped. “ It is all such—such confounded rubbish, this talk about Italians being romantic,” he broke out suddenly. “ It is a superstition which came into fashion with Garibaldi and his legions. The situation was romantic, if you like. There was a mystery about it then. If you look at a bare turnpike road at midnight you may get at a sense of romance and mystery.”

“ And this is the man who never rested

until he had brought me to Italy!" said Hardinge, laughing, and clasping his hands behind his head.

"Italy? My dear fellow, you don't mean to say that you believe that Italy, our Italy—what we mean by saying Italy—belongs, or has belonged, or ever will belong, to men of this calibre?" His eyes turned again in Cesco Lalli's direction. "Material Italy may, perhaps, when they have turned a few more churches into barracks, and copied the Boulevard Haussmann, and canalised the Tiber, and—and whitewashed the Coliseum. That will be 'Italy for the Italians,' with a vengeance. What we find here—our Promised Land, whose slightest memory is a joy and a possession, whose very name is dear as desire—what have they had to

do with it? what pleasure do they get out of it? Have you ever heard an Italian speak enthusiastically of anything beautiful in nature? Can they see it, except through an effort of complacence, even when it is pointed out to them? And how often have you met a Roman in a picture-gallery?"

He frowned and pulled his hat farther down over his eyes.

"You have been here longer than I have, Miss Damon——"

"Well, but I think, you know," said Octave, "that they are very nice, and—and attentive."

"Ah," Lexeter said, glancing at her from under the brim of his hat.

"I don't know that I quite agree with you, my boy," began Hardinge doubtfully. "I remember Mazzini——"

“Yes, there is Mazzini,” said Lexeter slowly; “and there have always, in all countries, been starlike souls akin to his, as high and shining and solitary; august orbs rising in the murkiest midnight to prophesy the new birth of a new saviour among men. I was not thinking of such as these. I was speaking of the average Italian, a being as passionate as he is shallow; a creature uncultivated and sonorous, unscrupulous and prudent; a man who uses the most beautiful language in the world to express the most *banal* ideas, as he uses the most beautiful country to illustrate the most barren modern doctrines—an overgrown unproductive army and the ideals of a popular parliament.”

“You can’t deny their common-sense——” began Hardinge.

“They are the most practical-minded of individuals, if you come to that.”

“—— and if ever I take to ecclesiastical architecture,” the young American said, glancing at Octave with a smile, “I shall build an altar to common-sense. Not that commonest form of common-sense, which is merely prevalent and classified stupidity; but an altar to the unknown god, to the faculty one pretends to be surprised not to find in the lowest classes and which is really the final expression, the *résumé* of the finest highest civilisation. The Greeks knew it,” Hardinge said, raising himself slightly, resting his elbow upon the sand and turning his keen and resolute profile to the sea—“they knew this temperate, flexible, dispassionate condition of the mind.”

He might have passed for a young Greek himself at that moment. As far as temperament goes he was certainly quite Hellenic. There was an expression of vitality about Hardinge which was really extraordinary. His laugh was contagious, his enjoyment of life a positive pleasure to everyone who knew him. I think he never himself was aware of the number of his friends. When he was pleased, his good-humour was irresistible as the sunshine. “Confound the fellow! I believe he thinks he is born into a perfectly fresh world every morning !” someone had said in describing him ; and indeed I fancy the observation was not far wrong.

Lexeter looked at him now for a moment in silence. He shook his head ; he got up slowly to his feet and thrust his hands into

his pockets and walked away. His head was bent down.

“Poor Mr. Lexeter,” said Octave, looking after him, “he walks as if he were tired. It must be very disagreeable to be lame in that fashion.”

“Poor old boy, he is the best fellow I know—taking him all round—is Lexeter,” said Hardinge lazily enough, and still looking at her.

His eyes were dark and not large, but extraordinarily brilliant; their ordinary expression was one of an intelligent, rather satirical amusement. Some man at his college had given him the nickname of the “Social Naturalist,” by way of defining and resenting the mental attitude which he commonly adopted. He had told Miss

Damon of the *sobriquet* ; she remembered it now, as she sat with her long dark eyelashes lowered, the delicate transparent colour coming and going on her cheek. The high sand-dune above them was crested with a low sturdy growth of rosemary and laurel. Their branches were swaying stiffly ; from time to time the leaf-shadows rested upon her hands and hair. The sea before them lay still and glittering.

“Barbara must have gone farther than she intended,” said Octave.

There was no sign now of anyone moving along the sands. Lexeter had rejoined Mr. Floyd. They had strolled back towards the wood together.

“I want you to do something for me, if you will,” Mr. Floyd had said. He had a

great liking for Lexeter. "I shall pay you the compliment, sir, of not apologising to you for troubling you with an account of my private affairs," the old gentleman began, formally enough, leaning both wrinkled hands upon his old-fashioned cane, and standing with his hat pushed well back, turning his large pale joyless face upon Lexeter. "You know this young fellow, Lalli?" he asked.

"I have met him at your house, and seen him half-a-dozen times at a café."

"Well, well; you know him as young men know each other," the older man said testily.

His request was very simple. Mrs. Damon had pointed out to him the fact of Lalli's evident intentions. "These facts are

plain enough to lookers-on, sir. They are made a common subject of comment. It is only those nearest concerned who are to be kept in ignorance—tricked and blinded until all is over, that the fools may not be disappointed of their cursed idiotic laughter.

Well—this has nothing to do with my daughter," Mr. Floyd said suddenly, fixing his light piercing glance upon his companion's face. "The child is only following out a woman's first instinct of concealment. It's inevitable ; I don't blame her. And perhaps indeed the secret has not been such a close one. You may have observed it yourself, sir, although you have not considered it wise or necessary to give me warning?"

"I should certainly not have presumed to

speak to you about Bar—about Miss Floyd,” Lexeter said quietly, taking out a cigar and beginning methodically to light it. He had received an impression which many subsequent trifles only tended to confirm, that the proud old Carolinian had never known how to forget the woman he had loved, and who betrayed him. In the bitterness of his resentment he would have destroyed every association and memory of his youth. Was it his pride or his heart which had experienced the fiercest pang? In either case the fact remained that his daughter was now the only visible token left of that past, to recall the humiliation of those days —their impotent rage ; their despair. And his daughter——

“ Whatever I can ascertain about Count

Lalli I will tell you. I fear it will be very little. I know nothing against him. I know almost nothing of the men with whom he associates," Lexeter said. "If we have not more things in common I daresay it is as much my fault as his. I am an unsociable brute in a general way. I get along well enough with Walter Hardinge ; but he is an exception. I will find out what I can for you, but I fear you have made a poor selection of a diplomatic agent," he went on, looking down with a curious sort of smile. "And, candidly, I don't think the count is ever likely to make me many confidences. We are not sympathetic to each other. Why ? upon my word I have nothing to say against him ! He is very good-looking. I have heard Miss Damon express

great admiration for him. She says he is interesting. I don't know. I am a much older man than he is. I have a different life ; very different occupations. It is perfectly reasonable that we should find next to nothing to say to each other." He raised his head and looked about him with eyes which noted but little of the quiet loveliness of the afternoon light among the pine stems. And yet, long after, it was curious how he remembered the details of this day. "I am very much older than Lalli," he repeated.

"And I suppose Barbara likes his good looks, and all that sort of thing ?"

Lexeter made no answer.

"It would have been more friendly of you, Lexeter—I should have taken it more

kindly of you, sir—to have warned me of this before," Mr. Floyd said again. "I am not in the habit of expecting much frankness from the majority of men. 'Tis human nature to think first of one's own interest. But we have been friendly together——"

"Should you have spoken in my place? I do not think you had the slightest right to exact that from me," the young man said quite respectfully. He thrust his hands deep down into his pockets. "Lalli has some money, I believe. He has a house somewhere in the country, and there is this place of his—this farm that we are all going out to. I believe that he is well off for an Italian."

Yes—Mrs. Damon had intimated as much.

“It will be a proof of his disinterestedness, marrying Barbara. My daughter has but very moderate expectations. Her husband must necessarily be provided with an income. 'Tis true there may be something coming to her later. There is some small property left by—by Mrs. Floyd. I shall be forced to go to America to look after it if indeed there is any prospect of this marriage. You see some of the pleasures of paternity,” he said, looking up at Lexeter with his worn unexpectant smile.

“You never married, Lexeter. I would not be understood to say anything disrespectful of the ladies ; they have their own way of doing things. But perhaps you are wise, sir, you are wise.”

“There is such a thing as the wisdom of

necessity," said Lexeter, rather curtly. He was conscious of that sort of speechless irritation which comes from having our deficiencies accepted as patent facts.

They said nothing more to each other. "Presumably Mrs. Damon will have finished her siesta," Mr. Floyd observed. Lexeter watched him moving away through the wood—a short, heavy, middle-aged figure. His gray head was bent down a little; all that joyous tenderness of summer light and shadow only served, by contrast, to make the unelastic step seem heavier, the unexpectant face more dull.

Lexeter stood looking after him with a curious mingling of liking and compassion. He felt as a man feels towards his old friend and companion on the eve of a final separa-

tion ; he was moved by an impulse of extreme indulgence and toleration. "And so poor little Barbara marries her handsome soldier lover, and—and that is the end of the old story," he thought. He looked up at the full budding exuberance of fresh life about him. Spring had come ; it was time to break up the winter encampment. The new season had prevailed over the old, he told himself with an indescribable pang of regret—of fruitless longing. His next action was not insignificant of that complex mood, half cynicism half sentiment, which characterised the man. He took a note-book out from his pocket and jotted down a list of figures on the page. They were old calculations ; he viewed them now with the accustomed bitterness of an old enemy. "I

wonder what Mr. Floyd would say to such an income as that? There is no fool like an old fool, but I defy Folly herself to sail far out of her course with such an anchor dragging," he said, shutting up his notebook and restoring it to his pocket absently. He began thinking of Barbara. He began asking himself how it was possible that she should care for that fellow? "Damn him! he is like a moral advertisement—all his attractions thrust upon the public."

But this did not make him doubt the probability of Barbara's fascination. At Lexeter's age a man is not apt to consider moral incongruity as the kind of barrier to an eligible marriage, which will be patent to other eyes than his own. The fellow can afford to marry her, he thought—and if she

has got to care for him already—poor little Barbara !

Perhaps there was something contagious in Mr. Floyd's hopeless fatalism. It seemed to him impossible now that this marriage should be prevented.

There were flowers growing in the short grass at his feet. He stooped down and plucked one of them—a white narcissus, such as he had given Barbara a few hours earlier. He held it in his hand irresolutely, looking up the road. It seemed to him quite possible that he should see her coming down there towards him between the trees. All that green and golden wealth of tremulous light and shade seemed only a fitting background for the gracious young figure. She should come to him with the sunlight falling

on her white hands, and a smile in those clear trustful eyes. And then—then—the flower dropped from between his fingers. It fell on the bare stones of the pathway. He looked down at it—“*Absit omen!*” He attempted to smile, but it was at best a dubious sort of contraction which passed over his face. He shook his head impatiently; presently he too thrust his hands back into his pockets and walked away. He was walking towards the sea.

## CHAPTER IX.

THEY had gone some little distance from the others before Lalli spoke to her.

“ Possibly—probably, you are wondering why I asked you to come ? ”

“ Not at all. It was careless of us all to have been speaking English. I do not know how it happened. I am sorry,” Barbara answered absently. She had been walking along with her face to the sea, she turned it now towards him. “ I think it was *I* who asked you,” she began, smiling.

Whatever it was she saw in her com-

panion's face it had the effect of silencing her.

The fisherman's hut rose close before them, an empty shed, thatched with the dead reeds of the Stagno. Some storm had blown the rude door from its hinges ; it lay broken and rotting in the shadow on the sand.

“After all there was nothing to see here,” she said, looking down.

Her own voice sounded uncertain, strange ; but she was conscious of nothing distinctly. The wide plain of sea, the unfamiliar open look of things about them, gave to this moment something of the vivid arbitrary quality of a dream. The very feeling of the hot loose sand under foot seemed to remove them to an infinite distance from

the Roman streets. A gull flew by overhead, the shadow of its wings making a dark moving spot across the sand; the light restless wind blew more freshly in their faces.

“I am tired; and there is nothing to see. Shall—shall we go back?” said Barbara, standing still and raising her eyes with a palpable effort to his face.

Lalli turned his head with a slight start, as if some oppressive spell had broken.

“No. Why should we go back?” he asked slowly, gazing fixedly at her. The sea-bird flitted past again, its shrill cry sounded faintly from a distance.

“Oh, as you please,” said Barbara, looking down again with an effort.

She moved her hand, and the glove

she was holding fell upon the sand at her feet. He stooped to pick it up for her ; it was at that moment Lexeter was watching them.

“ Why should I tell you what you know already ? But it is impossible you should know how much I love you,” he said.

Her hands closed suddenly upon each other. It was the first time in her life that any man had spoken to her such words. She bent her head ; involuntarily she moved on a few steps towards the shelter of the ruined hut. Across the intense personal consciousness of that moment there flashed the conviction that this was a crisis, her life could never be quite the same again ; it had been touched from the outside.

She moved on mechanically to the shadow and sat down on the broken planks. A high sand-dune rose behind the gray weather-beaten building; in this sheltered corner the coarse sea-grass had spread an inextricable knotted network down the hillside. There was a dark semicircular line of seaweed, the dead drift of some forgotten storm, on the sand at her feet. She sat looking at this. Lalli was standing in front of her. He was saying:

“I think I must have loved you from the first moment I ever saw you. Do you remember that night you went to the ball? You came down the stairs all in white, and Margherita was holding up a light behind you.”

“Ah!” said Barbara, bending her head

lower. She remembered confusedly what he had told her that first evening; of how he had watched her for months in the different churches; but perhaps he had forgotten? A ray of sunlight passing through the cracks in the weather-beaten boards fell upon her hair as she moved, and on the warm delicate whiteness of her chin and throat.

"I have always loved you," said Lalli, looking down at her. "I have no right to say so. I have nothing to offer you——"

She lifted her hand slightly. "I wish you would not——"

"I have nothing. And you—you are rich——" Barbara looked up quickly. "You have friends. You are beautiful. You—you have all your life before you,"

Lalli said, turning his face abruptly to the sea, his voice going up into a thin high falsetto with excitement. "I am a doomed man. Who shall struggle against fatality ? I am fated ; I told you so that first night. Whatever I touch goes wrong. Whatever I attempt fails. Whatever I wish for——" He stopped short, grinding his heel into the sand. "'Tis fatality," he said again, looking down at Barbara with a white face and wild gleaming eyes. "I am a man pursued by destiny. (*Sono un uomo perseguitato dal destino.*) I submit."

Barbara lifted her face quickly ; he was not looking at her.

"Do you suppose I have not seen things and understood things ?" he broke out incoherently. "I know that your father hates

me. I know that he only tolerates my presence in the house. And as for that Mr. Lexeter, do you suppose I cannot see through his pretext of not speaking French ? Not speaking French !—the coward ! he did not dare say so before me.”

“Mr. Lexeter is not a coward,” said Barbara flushing suddenly.

“A liar then !”

“And it was not Mr. Lexeter at all ; it was Mr. Hardinge who said that, as a joke,” she went on gravely, not noticing the interruption, but with a sudden pang of distaste and disappointment. Why would he persist in using such words ? in showing himself in such a light ?

“And you say this to me ?” Lalli demanded shrilly. “You defend those men to

me ? They had better be careful. I—I am not used to so much patience.” He took a sudden step forward, and his voice dropped. “I have borne with so much in these last weeks only to see you—only to be near you,” he said imploringly. He bent down and touched her clasped hands with the utmost gentleness. “I do love you so, Barbara—dearest !” he said.

She started at the word ; he could see her lip tremble.

“I would go through it all again, every moment of it, for the chance of feeling your hand in mine—my dearest !” he said hotly, watching her face with eager supplicating looks. “Did I ever do you any harm, Barbara ? You—you are like ice to me—like stone. I put all my life in your hands,

at your feet, and you—— Sometimes I think you have no more feeling in you than —that ! ” he said, striking his hand against the rough splintered wood. His voice dropped again. “ You—you are making me suffer horribly.”

“ But, Count Lalli—— Oh ! I am so sorry ! ” she said helplessly, hiding her face in her hands.

He hardly noticed her distress. “ Two years ago I had a magnificent career before me. That is over. Since then I have been living the life of a dog. I don’t know why I haven’t shot myself through the head ; twenty times over I have been on the point of doing it. I am sick of life. *Son stuffo di questa vita.* And because once I have trusted to somebody ; because for once I

have believed that a woman—— It is quite as well that you never cared for me,” he said sullenly, crossing his arms over his chest and hanging his head. “I bring misfortune with me. And how should you have cared? You have youth, you have beauty, you have friends—what have I to give you? To be unfortunate is, to be deserted, as this world goes. I bring misfortune. ’Tis fatality.”

He turned his head away sharply.

“ I suppose—— I don’t know why I should want to hear you say it”—with a short nervous laugh—“ but—you don’t care for me at all? I have given you my life. But you don’t love me, Barbara ?”

The wind stirred uneasily in the blackened weeds. “ You don’t love me ?” he de-

manded again, staring down at her with wild incredulous eyes.

“I—cannot,” said Barbara, lifting up her face. Her sweet voice had grown husky. His words had conjured up a vision of herself standing aloof, refusing help when assistance was wanted. Her own reluctance to answer him seemed the basest form of selfishness, and yet—— She looked at him, helplessly, like a child. Her cheek was still red from the pressure of her fingers. “I thought—that when you said we might be friends——” she began. She hesitated. She put her hand up to her lips in an uncertain way, and was silent.

“Don’t cry,” the young man said hastily, still looking at her. It was almost the first word he had spoken which sounded as if he

were aware of anything outside of his own smarting vanity, his stinging disappointment. His own eyes filled with tears as he spoke, He never thought of hiding it. "I would not grieve you," he said more gently. He waited for her to speak, perhaps; but she was silent. "You talk of friendship," he went on presently, with growing vehemence, "of friendship between you and me! You affect to believe that it was possible! Friendship! Why I have loved you since the first moment I knew you. And you——"

"I thought it *was* possible," said Barbara, turning pale.

He never for an instant believed her. I do not imagine it even occurred to him that she was speaking truth. "I had a sister once, who died," he said slowly, finding that

she remained silent. “ She died in my arms. I was only nineteen, and she was my friend —my confidant. It nearly broke my heart.” He put out his right hand. “ Take her place, Barbara,” he said. “ You do not love me—’tis fatality. Be my sister then ; let me feel that you could come to me as to a brother. Trust me—depend on me.” He held out his hand, it was torn and bleeding where he had struck it against the rough splinters of the wall. “ I don’t ask you for anything ; I devote myself to you. Only give me your hand, to show that you trust me,” he said. The delicate white fingers were trembling as he took them into his. “ You are not afraid of me ? You are as safe with me—you would be as safe with me anywhere—in the midst of a desert—as

if—as if you were the blessed Madonna ! ” he said, sighing, and looking at her with wild reproachful eyes.

There was something in his tone and in the sight of his bleeding hand which touched and moved her quite unaccountably.

“ Please take my handkerchief. Here, I will tie it up for you,” she said hurriedly. Her face flushed a little, as she held it bent down, her fingers busy in binding up the scratch. “ *I would* trust you ; but you said you did not want my friendship,” she said in a low voice, and smiling, although she felt her eyes filling as she spoke.

“ *Non è vero!* I never said it ! ” he answered hastily. He bent down and kissed the fingers which were fastening the knot of the bandage. He held her hand in his ; she did not draw

it away ; she was anxiously willing to prove to him her passionate sense of gratitude for his devotion. She raised her eyes rather timidly and looked at him. He was watching her with his head thrown back, with an indescribable look of melancholy and tenderness softening the lines of his handsome arrogant face. With his wounded hand he looked indeed like some devoted cavalier. She stood looking up at him ; her eyes were dark and wet, and two tears were glittering on her cheek. She put up her left hand—he was still holding the other—and brushed them away and smiled. The wind blew restlessly in their faces. The tide was coming in with a slow soft sound of lapsing waves. It was a very happy moment for them both.

They walked back along the beach still hand-in-hand, their lengthening shadows moving on before them, across the wave-indented sands. It was long years before Barbara appreciated the full significance of that interview—its influence in shaping all her future life; and yet they had been away so short a time that the sail which Hardinge had spoken of was still in sight, a mere white cloud against the sunny sky. She watched it lessening, fading away in the horizon, following its unknown course with who can tell what vague swift dreams? But she started, and a look of trouble came over her face again as Lalli asked abruptly :

“ Who gave you those flowers ? ”

He was looking at the bunch of white narcissi which Lexeter had gathered for her,

and which still hung, crushed and drooping, where she had fastened them in her dress.

“Throw the things away, I beg of you. I will not have you wearing that man’s flowers,” he said vehemently, speaking with the most curious mingling of irritation and entreaty in his voice. He seemed to attach an importance to the request that was quite incomprehensible, returning to it again and again, protesting when she refused—and at first she refused almost indignantly—that he meant to imply no disrespect to the giver. “Only do it for me. It is a little thing; what can it cost you to do it? Only do it for me. Throw them away, to satisfy me, Barbara. By heaven, you would not have to ask me for a thing twice!” Count Lalli said passionately.

“Hush ! There is Mr. Lexeter himself coming to meet us. Oh, please, hush,” said Barbara, looking anxiously towards the wood. Intentionally or not, the flowers fell from her dress as she moved rapidly forward. She put out her hand. “Are you ready ? Have we kept you waiting ? I—I hope we have not kept you waiting, Mr. Lexeter ?” she asked rather incoherently. It was with a feeling of relief that she greeted his friendly melancholy face.

Had he heard anything of what they had been saying ?

“The others have gone on through the wood,” he said, looking at her in his quiet kindly way ; and it was then, and with a certain pang of regret, that she noticed his gift of blossoms lying bruised and broken

upon the path. “Miss Damon proposed that they should stroll back slowly and wait for us near the carriage.” He glanced at Lalli. “I hope Monsieur le Comte was satisfied with his inspection of the house?”

“I—oh, we did not go into it,” cried Barbara hastily, looking from one to the other of the two men.

They walked back through the pine-wood almost in silence. The shadows reached now far across the causeway. It was only the pine-tops which still glowed, a mass of deep-bronzed green, in the warm evening light. Barbara walked on rather quickly. She carefully avoided looking at Lalli; indeed he seldom addressed her, and when he did so it was with a marked formality of manner which made the girl’s heart beat

painfully. She felt more than usually grateful to Lexeter for the suggestion when he proposed her taking the empty place in the carriage.

“You are tired, and it will be no trouble for me to lead your horse home now,” he said.

“You are very good to me,” the girl answered thankfully. Lalli was walking in a line with them but on the farther side of the road.

The night was warm and still. Even Mrs. Damon made no objection when the coachman proposed to leave the carriage open. At first, on leaving Ostia, she had begun talking in a languid way to Barbara, but before long the easy steady motion, the dim light, and the unusual

fatigue of many hours spent in the open air, proved too strong for her. She opened her eyes wide, asked a question about Octave, and without waiting for an answer, she wrapped her fur-lined cloak more closely about her and closed her eyes and slept.

The light faded slowly away from the west ; the hedgerows became blurred and shapeless ; here and there a pool of water glimmered softly in the low-lying meadows, reflecting the starlit shadowless sky. There was no sound audible but the muffled tramp of the horses.

From time to time Lexeter rode up to the side of the carriage ; he rode beside it with his hand resting upon the open door. Barbara hardly spoke to him ; she turned her eyes slowly from her father's face to his

with an indescribable feeling of safety and protection. She too rested her head against the cushions, but it was not to sleep. A charm as softly penetrating as the spell of this calm spring night was upon her. Lalli's words : "I ask you for nothing ; I devote myself to you," were like some influence in the air about her, and life was noble and very sweet. She made no more resistance. She felt herself surrounded by love ; she felt inexpressibly safe.

## CHAPTER X.

MR. FLOYD found a telegram waiting for him when he returned that night. It was a summons to meet an old friend at Perugia, he told his daughter briefly. There was to be a private sale of some valuable manuscripts and books ; it was probable that he should be away from home for several days. He left Rome by an early morning train. “Don’t get up for me ; I can have my breakfast at the café at the station. Don’t get up. It is nonsense your getting up at that hour,” he said to Barbara.

Afterwards she was always glad to re-

member how fully she had intended to disobey him.

“I am too tired to tell you all about it to-night,” she said. She stood in the doorway with a candle in her hand, looking at him as he sat with his back to her, writing a note. The light was shining upon his gray head—she noticed how gray his head had turned of late. There was an old sealing upon his finger, which she idly remembered having played with when she was a child ; she had seen it every day since then, and never remembered it before. She went slowly towards him and put her hand upon her father’s shoulder.

“Are you waiting for anything ? Good-night, good-night again,” he said, without looking up.

After all, what difference could it make ? She could speak to him about Cesco Lalli in the morning. What difference could it possibly make ?

She went to her own room. The window was open. She set down her light upon a table, and walked over to the casement and looked out. It was her favourite place and attitude ; she was familiar with every dark silhouette of rooftop and convent belfry against the sky. It was early yet, but Rome at night is of all cities the most silent. She looked down upon darkened houses and scattered lights. The wind blew fresh and softly in her face, stirring the loose hair upon her forehead. She laid her head down upon her clasped hands, looking up at the clear quiet

sky. She was not consciously thinking of Count Lalli. She remembered what Mr. Hardinge had said to her on their ride out. And then the cadenced sound of the horses' feet, as Lexeter rode home beside the carriage ; and how kind he was to her. Poor Mr. Lexeter ! Poor fellow ! She could not have told you herself why she pitied him, except that at that moment there seemed no limit to the goodwill and tenderness she felt towards all her little world. Looking up at those stars, life seemed so full of fine possibilities. Life ! She was still child enough to look forward, half-hopefully half-humbly, to life as to some great fact, an opportunity which was approaching. And she meant to do so much——

And then she went back again to that half-hour by the fisherman's hut on the sands. She felt the strong warm pressure of Cesco's hand on hers. How noble he was! How chivalric! "I want nothing. I ask you for nothing. I devote myself to you," he said.

Very nearly at the same time Lalli was sitting at a corner-table—his usual place—at the café behind the old post-office, opposite the House of Parliament, on Monte Citorio. He was not alone—Marcantonio Borgia was with him. The worthy cavaliere looked troubled. "*Che diavolo!* one does not know what to say exactly," he began again with hesitation.

"Say! Don't be a fool!" said Cesco sharply, raising his savage moody eyes from the floor.

He put both elbows upon the greasy marble table, between the empty coffee-cups and cigar ash, leaning halfway across it in his eagerness, and pouring out a wild incoherent mixture of love and wounded pride and jealousy.

Not marry that girl after what had passed between them—after his having committed himself? “Her father hates me,” he said, bringing his hand down heavily upon the table and staring hard at Borgia’s stolid and massive face—“her father hates me!” He was quite mistaken in making this statement. Mr. Floyd’s feelings towards the young Italian had never before to-day been even definite enough to be classed as dislike. But Lalli would not have believed this to be possible; we may speak of—we

so seldom realise—the indifference with which we are regarded. “Her old father hates me ; and as for that d—d Englishman—that Lexeter——”

“Lesseterre ! Is that the young one ?—the one who smiles ?—with the blue eyes ?”

“Don’t be a fool !” said Cesco again, impatiently.

He sat biting his nails and staring out at the dull empty piazza. A few drops of rain began to fall, making the worn old stones glisten in the gaslight. Some men were quarrelling in the opposite corner over their coffee and dominoes. An officer, an old acquaintance of his, passed by him and nodded. “Have you seen the evening paper ? Here, waiter, a glass of brandy. There is nothing new. I see that little

Raimondi is dead. You remember him ?— A little fellow, went as mad as a March hare. He used to be in your old regiment, poor devil ! Hallo ! what's the matter with you, Borgia ? What are you making such eyes at me for ? If you are talking secrets, why can't you say so, and be done with it ? Go on then. I've lived too long with my wife not to learn the virtue of deafness," the newcomer said good-naturedly. He got up and carried his glass to another table, opening the paper with an ostentatious parade of interest.

"I love that girl, you know. Confound it all ! I *do* love her," Lalli said suddenly, lifting up his head. All the sullenness, the air of commonness which ill-temper developed in his face, had passed out of it. He

looked very noble and handsome as he spoke. "I shall marry her, you know," he said, still watching Borgia with bright confident eyes. "I shall marry Barbara."

He sat up straighter, and laughed as he spoke—a joyous boyish laugh, which made the *dame du comptoir* look up with languid curiosity from the account-book she was verifying. "You seem happy to-night, signor conte. Can it be—— But there, *via'* one should not ask for reasons from a young man," she said as the two friends lingered a moment beside her counter, waiting for change. Lalli answered her with some idle compliment. I do not know what it was. Something probably which no more seemed incongruous to him than the fact of his discussing Barbara at such a time and place.

The woman laughed. “*Diamine!* but one sees that you are mad, both of you. A nice pair, upon my word! No, no, signor conte. One has heard all that before. Until he has sold them, the oranges never grow stale in the *fruttajolo*’s basket. *Che vuole?* One has heard all that before!”

She looked after them with a quick Italian smile—a flashing of eyes and lips—as they passed out into the wet and silent street.

“Cesco,” said Borgia, taking his arm, “don’t cut up rough now, there’s a good fellow—but—but—oh, hang it all, I say! How long is it since you have been to Bracciano?”

Lalli stopped whistling and looked at him.

"I—haven't been to Bracciano," he said.

"Ah. Ah yes; I see."

"Precisely so. The observation does you infinite credit. But would you mind explaining what it is you see? Not that I'm particularly curious. I ask for the sake of information chiefly."

"All right!" said Borgia sulkily, shrugging his heavy shoulders. "As you please. Only it strikes me as being rather late in the day——"

"It is a quarter to twelve precisely," said Cesco, politely taking out his watch.

"——for foolery of that kind. As if, first and last, I did not know very nearly as much as yourself about *la bella Regina*. Ah, talk about a beautiful face, if you like——"

“The beautiful face had better not be talked about too much just now, my good fellow,” said Cesco deliberately. They had come to the door of his house. He took a latch-key from his pocket, and led the way up the dark narrow stair. He struck a match as he entered, leaving the door wide open behind him. He lighted the lamp on a small side-table, and sat down on the sofa and looked up at Borgia standing in front of him.

“You apparently do not know — you seldom do know anything before I tell you of it, my poor friend—that the dear cousin is on the verge of taking unto herself a husband? It’s a fact, I assure you. It is a very good match, says my aunt—I had a letter from my amiable aunt only this

morning. She was always so fond of her nephew ! He, Regina's husband I mean, is the new *deputato*, Cardella. He is from Pistoja ; he is forty ; he goes to mass every Sunday ; and now he is to marry my cousin Gina, almost immediately."

"The devil he is!" said Marcantonio Borgia.

Lalli only laughed.

He continued to sit there for more than an hour, his hat on his head, and his feet thrust straight out before him. The lamp, flickering in the draught, threw curiously varying shadows of himself now up on the ceiling and now against the wall. "Yes ; I am in love again," he thought, and an imperceptible smile of satisfaction passed rapidly over his face. He looked interested

—puzzled and yet triumphant. Any looker-on might easily have been justified in concluding that here at least was a man to whom good fortune had shown itself in unexpected places. The most experienced actor, after a lifetime spent, say, in merging his own personality in that of the young Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, might yet be pardoned some slight shock of surprise at finding his royal commands of actual force and meaning. And Lalli was by no means unprovided with a defensive armour of that cheap scepticism, which we are apt to dignify by the name of experience. But now, for the moment, he was only conscious of being uplifted and borne along by a strong current of outside influence. He made no struggle against it; on the contrary, he resigned

himself luxuriously to this new emotion, which promised to differ in quality, if not in kind, with much that he had known before.

When at last he roused himself from his abstraction, he still moved across the room languidly and with a preoccupied air. But presently he lit a cigar, and unlocked his desk, and took out from it a folded paper. It was a letter which he had received from his cousin that morning, a letter written on highly-glazed and perfumed paper, in small and feeble characters, as if with the point of a pin, and enclosed in an envelope further ornamented by a coloured wreath of flowers. He read it through twice carefully, and then for a moment it seemed as if he were about to answer it, for he half-reached across the table and drew a blotting-book nearer to

him. But it only ended in his throwing himself back in his chair with an impatient gesture. Poor Gina! it was, perhaps, the first time that she had ever succeeded in making him thoroughly uncomfortable, and it was not probable that he would forget it, although, just now, any outside appeal sounded vague and irrelevant—like the precise wording of a late king's epitaph amidst the coronation festivities of his successor. A woman never will understand when a thing is ended! he reminded himself half wearily. But any such consideration seemed of very slight importance as compared to the question of what attitude Mr. Floyd was likely to assume?—above all, of what Barbara was likely to have said to her father? He recognised in-

stinctively that with Barbara's character it was idle to count upon her having judiciously suppressed all reference to the change in their relative position, or even upon her having presented the facts to Mr. Floyd with any reference to his presumable wishes. The idea that by remaining silent she might possibly be escaping blame, would be, he knew, the very incentive needed to urge her into fuller confidence. The fact seemed unaccountable from any known theory of motives, but he accepted the inconvenient frankness as regarded her; it seemed a part of herself, like her delight in all out-of-door pleasures, or that wide-eyed seriousness of glance which separated her in his imagination from other women.

But in fact Barbara had never spoken. She had awakened late from a heavy sleep to find the rain beating against the window, and hear Margherita's account of how the signor padrone had started off in all that storm—and as for stopping to think twice about his rheumatism, not he. It was as if new life had come into the house since the day the young signor conte, bless his handsome face! had come to fetch the signor and the signorina to Bracciano. Not that she, Margherita, was one to hold that any young man was good enough to have the run of the house—like the Signora Damon, who—she knew it from the signora's own cook, Rosalia—would go out of the room, while young *forestieri* were calling, and never think twice about leaving Miss Octave to

talk to them by herself. No, the saints be praised ! that was not her way of looking at it. Although, *se sa !* youth will be youth, and as for shutting oneself up in a convent, if the Lord wanted the good-looking women to give up the world and pleasing themselves then what were the ugly ones made for, she would just like to know ?

It was a long empty day. In the morning she had intended to go to Octave, and instead of that she had taken up some needlework and seated herself by an open window, listening to the soft slow falling of the rain. The hours too seemed to pass softly. Before she could realise it the whole day was gone. It was growing dusk. She let her work slip from her knee to the ground, and rose and began pacing up and

down the long room in the twilight. As she passed each window she could see the heavy clouds moving slowly in the wind. A bell rang sharply and suddenly from the convent across the way. Margherita was bringing in a lamp, she stopped and crossed herself ; it was the Ave Maria.

“ And there is a book for you, signorina, brought by the signor conte’s own man,” the old woman said abruptly, putting a package down before her on the table.

It was a popular history of Greece, a large square volume with little old-fashioned woodcuts, representing such things as Alcibiades and his dog, or Socrates drinking the hemlock. Many of the passages were marked with feeble pencilings, and on the

flyleaf was recorded, in a boy's handwriting, that this book was presented to Maria Lalli on her fourteenth birthday, as a mark of affection, by her devoted brother Cesco. And then followed a date of some ten years back. Immediately under this were added the words "To my other sister," and the word "Ostia" several times underscored. She sat up until nearly midnight turning the pages over. They were the old stories which she had learned as a child, and there was something in the simplicity and homeliness of the gift, which was like a link between her own and this other childhood. A whole world of association was growing up around her as she sat there alone in that silent room, turning over the yellow leaves of this shabby old school-book, and listening

half unconsciously to the soft ceaseless dropping of the rain.

When Lexeter came in to call one afternoon two or three days later, this book was the first thing he noticed lying on the table beside Barbara's work. He picked it up and glanced at it inquiringly, but laid it down again almost immediately, and without making any comment.

"That is—Count Lalli sent me that to read," she said presently, seeing that he was not going to speak.

"So I imagined," said Lexeter indifferently.

He stayed there for perhaps half-an-hour, saying very little. The afternoon light fell full upon Barbara's bent head as she sat in her accustomed seat in the window. He

watched for a little the calm regular movement of her white hands busied about her embroidery, and then his glance wandered idly about the large familiar room. The noise of the city was scarcely perceptible in that old-fashioned quarter, where every detail seemed invested with the charm of peaceful continuity, from the sunlight falling on the old parlour walls to the sparrows twittering in their nests, and the soft cooing of Barbara's doves on the convent roof across the way.

When he rose to take leave he stood still for a moment looking around him, like a man who is bidding some familiar spot farewell.

“I shall see you again?—soon?” said Barbara, giving him her hand and smiling at

him affectionately. She was so accustomed by this time to his varying moods that she hardly observed that he did not answer her. But, I think, if she had seen the look in his eye as he went out of the door she would have called him back, and then, who knows ? between these two simple and loyal-minded people there might have been some explanation. But evidently this thing was not to be.

## CHAPTER XI.

SHE saw Count Lalli twice in the week which followed. The first time was at the opera. She was there with Mrs. Damon and Octave. There were several other people in the box — Mr. Clifford Dix among others. He came in late; he had been dining at the Costanzi Hotel with a party of Americans, and among other things he had told them that he looked upon Boston, Massachusetts, as upon the literary junk shop of England. When he came in he took a place behind Barbara's

chair and began talking to her. He was in exceedingly good spirits.

“I went to see ‘Suicidio’ last night, the new play. You should get Mrs. Damon to take you, Miss Floyd. It is wonderfully clever. By the way, I saw you there, Hardinge.”

“I only stayed through the second act. I had another engagement. But suicide is not an argument,” said Hardinge, “at the best it is only a retort.”

“An unanswerable one, you must admit,” said Mr. Dix, taking up Barbara’s opera-glass and slowly adjusting the lenses.

“Ah,” observed Lexeter, “it is a curious thing, but all modern Italian literature seems written for men under five-and-twenty. It is the creed of a sous-lieutenant.

It is not the youth I object to ; but one is always so conscious of the regimental restrictions. No, it is not the youth ; for, in a way, youth alone is original. After all, youth is the gift of the gods ; experience is only the lesson of life."

"I have met in my time some dull scholars," Clifford Dix remarked carelessly. "By Jove ! I thought I knew that fellow. The back of his head has been puzzling me for the last five minutes. I am looking at your favourite Italian warrior, Miss Damon. The ex-papal Zouave. Lalli ?—Lalli ?—what is his name."

"Oh, he is Barbara's warrior, not mine," said Octave quickly, taking her fan from Hardinge and shutting it up with a pretended severity.

But in the next entr'acte she took some trouble to attract Lalli's attention as he stood up in his stall surveying the house. "He will be here presently," she said, putting her little gloved hand on the back of Barbara's chair. "I am quite sure he has recognised us, although it is odd that I cannot make him look up."

But on the whole it was a relief to Barbara that he did not seek to approach them. She would unquestionably prefer not to meet him again for some time to come. Perhaps she was afraid that he might do or say something which should jar upon her idea of him. It is very possible. The pleasure she derived from thinking of him was a very real one ; she was fascinated and

interested ; but she was not sure. There was something uncertain. It was—if Lalli had but known it—the propitious moment for him to press his claim. While the others were talking she sat looking at the stage. The music seemed to her nearer than their voices. The actors came and went, and she sat there watching them with grave beautiful eyes, leaning forward a little, her hands folded upon her knee. No one else had accorded more than the most casual notice to Lalli's presence there that night. But she was aware of the difference. She began to be intensely aware of slowly dividing wishes, and interests foreign to all the people around her. Their idle happy talk grew more and more a thing

outside, something apart from her own experience. She felt excluded, but the feeling did not pain her as it might have done. She felt rather like someone waiting to be called upon for great and devoted service. She had so much to give, that giving seemed the natural explanation of her being—*la raison d'être.*

When the music stopped and the curtain fell, for an instant she did not change her attitude. She sat still, looking earnestly at the silent stage. The others had risen. There was a perceptible pause while Miss Dix looked at her, with her opera-cloak in her hand.

“It is devotion to high art,” Octave affirmed with her little treble laugh. She

leaned over an empty chair and touched Barbara upon the shoulder. "My dear Barbara, you are accomplishing wonders. You are convincing Mr. Dix that an American girl can understand Rossini's music. He will have to write another story; he will have to put you in a book," she said. She was smiling still as she took Hardinge's arm to go down the stair.

"No, I am not laughing at Barbara," she affirmed in answer to his question; "at least, not exactly. Yes, I am amused. Men are so stupid."

"And young ladies are so candid. No, please don't apologise; don't modify what you have said. You have been the cause,"

said Hardinge, looking at her with playful solemnity, “the cause of my making an entirely new and unsuspected estimate of your sex.”

She gazed at him fixedly for a moment, and then the smile faded off her face. She hesitated for an instant. “Why do the wrong things happen? Why don’t the clever people care for each other?” she demanded.

“My dear Miss Damon, what a question! Am I not, then, devoted to Mr. Dix?”

“I think,” said Octave petulantly, “I think that if I were a man I should know *when* to be serious.”

“Ah,” he rejoined, with an instant change of tone, “you have never tried me. I am

serious. I can be serious." He looked down at the long dark lashes resting on her cheek. "I can be anything you please."

There was a crowd about the door, and the carriages drove up slowly.

"Here, let me take you out of the draught; let me put you in that chair in the corner," the young man said, looking about him promptly. He put her in the only available seat. "I should like to know what you were thinking of; I am interested. I am profoundly serious. I think that you owe me an opportunity for demonstrating how serious I am."

"You are clever enough to do it, but—no, it is impossible to ask you; it is too absurd. Let us go; I am sure the carriage

is waiting. I shall not speak of it again, but—ah, no! I am sure the carriage is waiting.”

“The carriage will not be there for another five minutes; there are twenty people waiting to drive off first. Why won’t you tell me?” Hardinge said, bending over her and picking up her fan. “You know,” he said, “you know very well that I am entirely at your service.”

“Ah,” said Octave, looking away, with a little soft catching of her breath. He represented so many things to her at that moment. The Damons were poor; they had an income which sufficed mother and daughter to live on abroad, but the late Mr. Damon had only partially illustrated the traditions and institutions of his country.

Octave remembered him dimly as the kindest of men, always overworked, and always good-natured—especially good-natured. But after losing one fortune, much to his own surprise he had died without making another. It was living abroad within very exact limits.

Octave leaned back a little farther in her chair. She looked down at the bracelet on her wrist. Her delicate little chin just rested on the swansdown border of her cloak. There was always a dainty precision, a deft and delicate definiteness about her movements and her personality generally. If the charm was not bewildering, it was none the less real. It was quite possible to analyse it, but, when all was said and done, there it remained,

unaltered. Lexeter had observed once that little Miss Damon reminded him at times of some old minuet music of Le Clair's—something gentle and joyous; a little chilly; a little thin in quality, perhaps, but always suggestive of willing restriction—the ordered curious charm of restriction and rule. As she sat there in her soft white fur, in the midst of that noise and confusion, she looked like some exquisitely-finished flower. It was impossible to avoid smiling at her prettiness, with something of the same feeling of wonder and pure pleasure that one would feel on looking at apple-blossom. And she all the while was so perfectly conscious of what young Hardinge represented! It needed only a wish on the part of this clear-eyed and decided young man to fulfil

every desire of which she was capable. And she felt herself capable of so much. She was quite capable, for instance, of never caring for any other man to the same degree. Yet there was not an appreciable pause before she answered :

“I am vexed about Barbara. You would never guess it ; I told you that men are stupid. But I am very vexed about Barbara, indeed. I am so fond of Barbara, Mr. Hardinge. I am——” She looked across the hall to where Lalli was standing under a gas-lamp. “I admire her very much,” she said softly.

“Miss Floyd has a fine nature. I admire her exceedingly,” said Hardinge.

“Yes.” Count Lalli was speaking to someone now. She could see his head and

shoulders towering above the crowd. He was looking furiously angry. When he was sullen he looked common, but to be angry suited the character of his face. He carried himself well, with a certain air of arrogance. She was watching him all the time she spoke.

“I admire her very much, but sometimes I am a little afraid of her ; now, for instance. I do not like to ask her what she is going to do about—that man !” Hardinge’s eyes followed the direction of hers. “If I were to ask her she would tell me at once, I know that very well. But I am afraid to ask her.”

“My dear Miss Damon, you surely do not propose that I should ask her such a question myself !”

“I do not suppose that you could,” said

Octave gravely. "Mr. Lexeter might, possibly; Barbara has a great confidence in Mr. Lexeter."

"You evidently do not feel any particular confidence in me!" said Hardinge, beginning to laugh again.

"No," said Octave, looking at him.

He hesitated a moment before answering. "I assure you I am very much to be depended upon. I have an unlimited confidence in myself."

"You can easily find an opportunity of illustrating that!" She rose from her seat. "The five minutes are over. I know that the carriage is waiting." She took his arm and stood still for a moment. "I tell you I don't want this sort of thing to go on. I don't want Count Lalli to marry her. Oh

yes ; I know. She will do as she pleases about that. But that is just where you do not understand Barbara ; she will do as somebody else pleases. She has no will. She is like a man ; she thinks herself the stronger of the two and she is always giving up !”

“ Do you call that a fault ? I shall remember it the next time you ask me to—— No ; but, Miss Damon, I *am* serious. Seriously !”

They were moving on now with the crowd.

“ I wish so much that you would do something to help me to prevent it,” said Octave rapidly, lowering her voice and glancing back over her shoulder. “ No, I don’t think Count Lalli stupid. Why should I ? He is very nice ; I like him. We saw

a great deal of him when we were in Rome three years ago, mamma and I. I was only sixteen then, and he was very attentive to me. He was the first gentleman who was ever very attentive to me. Like it? Yes, of course I liked it; why not? He used to bring me flowers, until mamma objected, Mamma thought I was too young for gentlemen's society."

"Ah, Mrs. Damon is so very judicious!" Hardinge exclaimed softly.

"Do you think so? I know I was awfully vexed at the time. That was one reason why we went away from Rome that winter; because mamma was so—judicious!"

"But you did not regret it?" said Hardinge quickly.

She smiled, putting up one tightly-gloved

little hand to adjust the rose-coloured ribbon in her hood.

“ I regretted his horse. He used to ride the most delightful horse, when we met him every day on the Pincio. That was when he was an officer in the Zouaves. We knew him very well. I had a great deal of influence over him in those days. Even mamma had to admit that my influence was very good. I made him give up riding on Sundays. He used to come to us instead. He always rode on Sunday after going to mass. He is very religious, you know.”

“ My dear Miss Damon, the man is a prodigy !”

“ Do you really think so ? But I don’t believe that he ought to be allowed to marry

Barbara. She always has ideas about things—poor Barbara ! She is sure to make mistakes. It is like that old story of the astronomer who kept looking at the stars and tumbled into ditches. Barbara is always looking out for stars. I think stars are all very well in their way, but I don't like ditches. Why do you laugh ? I learned that story at school. I don't remember anything else that I learned there, but I remember that. I wish you would go and call on the Floyds oftener. Tell Mr. Lexeter to call. You were so delightfully rude to Cesco Lalli the other day at Ostia, about speaking French. And I am sure Mr. Lexeter does not like him. I want you both to go there a great deal. I want you to help me to take care of Barbara.”

A movement of the crowd had thrown them close together.

“What is that, dear, that you are saying about taking care of me? Mr. Dix has been looking after me. I am quite safe, you absurd little person,” said Barbara, in her full and caressing voice—a voice which made you turn your head and look at her if you caught its tone, through the confused chatter of a crowd—and laying her hand affectionately upon Octave’s arm.

Hardinge looked at her attentively for a minute.

“Ah, you had better speak to Lexeter,” he murmured.

But Octave’s remarks had had the effect of giving a significance to Count Lalli’s movements. Hardinge felt interested. The next

time they all met, a few evenings later, was at the house of a certain Madame Raimondi, a bright-eyed Scotchwoman, who had once written a Primer or Introduction to the Study of Political Economy ; after which she drifted to Rome with the intention of studying art, and ended by marrying an Italian sculptor with a magnificent beard and an uncertain reputation. There was some story connected with their marriage, some opposition on the part of her friends, which gave an air of fictitious juvenility to the whole affair. Madame Raimondi was about forty ; she led an extremely busy life. In the daytime shewore an unvarying costume of black and crimson, which was always to be seen prominently in the foreground of every one of those assemblages of amateur

archæologists which all winter long preserve the Roman ruins from acquiring a bad social reputation for silence and solitude. In the intervals of her studies she painted semi-nude classical figures on the panels of her doors. She delighted in discussing the true proportions of the human figure. Her greatest ambition was to attend the life school in the *Via Margutta*, which her husband, however, prevented. What he could not prevent was her rolling up her sleeve on one occasion at a dinner-party, to support her argument by the actual illustration of a foreshortened arm in movement. She had a fine round arm, and small plump hands. Her only other claim to personal attractiveness was in the whiteness of her throat. She always wore square-cut bodices in the evening, and her

flat red face with its high cheek-bones looked not unlike a mask above the fairness of her neck. She never missed going to the Scotch church on a Sunday morning. She was a very kind-hearted woman, very fond of getting up concerts and charitable bazaars. At other times she devoted herself to giving Anglo-Italian conversazioni—apparently for the purpose of proving how little her numerous friends desired to make one another's acquaintance.

She came up to Barbara now, immediately upon her entrance.

“There are whole hosts of people asking after you, my dear child. Ah Octave. What a pretty dress—pink, of course. I call it sweet champagne colour. It is a pleasure to see some girls who have at least the sense

to speak Italian. I have no patience with these people here. Why can't they talk in French then?"

"Ah madame, *s'ils manquent de pain donnez leur donc de la galette*," said Hardinge, looking over her shoulder with a smile. "I cannot shake hands with you, Miss Damon, the presence of extraneous matter forbids. I can only offer to direct your course to the tea-room from afar. Madame Raimondi has only invited her most intimate friends this evening. I think we are something less than five to the square inch."

"Go away, Mr. Hardinge, I will not have you monopolising Miss Damon. Go away and make yourself agreeable to the Marchesina de Sanctis. I introduced you to her for that express purpose. I told her you

were charming. She is a lovely creature, look at the way her head is put upon her throat ! And she will have a dowry of a hundred thousand lire. I know it is a fact."

"I am not mercenary," said Hardinge, laughing. "And then Mademoiselle de Sanctis has a mamma. There is always a dragon watching over hidden treasure. Did you know that that is the authentic derivation of the great institution of the modern chaperon, Miss Damon ? It is indeed. And to some scientific minds the difference between a dowager and a dragon——"

"Miss Maclean—Miss Janet Maclean—was asking for you a moment ago," said Madame Raimondi to Barbara ; "what a

wonderful old woman the sister is ! I declare she does not look—— Ah cavaliere, *buona serà.* You will allow me to present to you the Cavaliere Marcantonio Borgia, Barbara dear ? Miss Floyd speaks Italian like an *angél.*"

"All angels speak Italian. You have proved it to us, signora," the newcomer said, bowing gravely over his opera-hat.

Barbara glanced quickly at him and looked away again. Like all imaginative people she was capable of sudden antipathies. And it was impossible to suppose that there could ever be anything in common between oneself and a thick-shouldered young man who paid stupid compliments, and who asked such questions as, How the signorina liked Rome ?

“I don’t know. I have been here so long I forget what I think of it.”

“Ah, that explains the wonderful Italian. *Una cosa stupenda.* *Già, già.* Then the signorina has been here a long time?”

Barbara shut her fan and looked across the room at Miss Maclean.

“It is a fine city, Rome,” the cavaliere added, putting up two yellow fingers to stroke his moustache. “A very interesting city. And there are many monuments of antiquity.”

“A great many,” said Barbara, feeling that to hear the average Italian speak of those monuments was like looking at the Coliseum on a mosaic breast-pin.

“*Già.* All built by the old Romans—*inostri padri.* All English are fond of

monuments. The signorina is undoubtedly English?"

"American."

"Americana! is it then possible?" said Borgia dramatically—it was some months now since he had taken pains to inquire very minutely into Miss Floyd's family circumstances and presumable fortune. "Ah, that too is a fine country. I know much about America. I have a cousin who has been to Nuova York."

"I am going about with a roving commission. I have orders to take you into the next room to listen to Ristori's recitation. But before that I must ask the lady with the three green feathers in her hair if she will have a cup of tea," said Hardinge, passing close in front of them and

looking down at Barbara with a confidential smile.

“I often see that young *forestière* at the Café di Roma,” remarked Borgia; “I see him speak to my friend Cesco Lalli. You who so well understand Italian, you should know my friend, Cesco Lalli, signorina.”

He was apparently intent upon examining the lining of his opera-hat as he said this, and before he had time to lift his eyes to observe the effect of his shot, a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a voice said close behind him :

“You are talking about me? I am indeed too much honoured. Miss Floyd, I have the pleasure of wishing you good-evening.”

It was Lalli himself suddenly appearing in the doorway.

Barbara looked up and smiled without speaking. She was surprised and bewildered to feel her heart beating so precipitately that the commonest expression of greeting failed her; and the consciousness that he would see this made her blush hotly over cheek and throat, and say rather more quickly than usual :

“ Oh, I was not speaking of you. Mr. Borgia just mentioned that you knew Mr. Hardinge. He was here a moment ago. He is coming back for me.”

“ Shall I go at once ? ” asked Cesco with some bitterness. He threw back his head and there was an ominous twitching about his nostrils. The cavaliere had turned away and was examining a photograph album.

“ Oh, please do not speak in that way.

You promised me not to speak in that way. And it is such a long while since I have seen you ; surely you do not mean to begin by quarrelling with me ?" said Barbara, again feeling that she was being hurried into saying all the wrong things and not knowing how to regain her equipoise,—the sisterly confidence and frankness which Lalli had asked for, which she had eagerly promised, and which was surely inconsistent with feeling like this ? It was a miserable way of spoiling their first meeting under the new condition of things. It was almost a relief when Hardinge rejoined them, and offered her his arm to move away. To Cesco's eyes she seemed to accept this change of companions without a moment's hesitation. She did not even turn her head

to look back, and how was it possible for him to divine the keenness of the disappointment which had brought that brightness to her glance and fixed the flush upon her cheek? She could not so much as classify the feeling herself. She was only conscious of an intense depression, a blankness—as of suddenly coming upon a dead wall in the place of the expected familiar outlook upon sea and sky. And the very inexplicableness of the feeling gave her force to thrust it from her for the moment, banishing it as we banish all unexpected emotion which is strong enough to wait, to gather strength and importance by the very fact of its wilful suspense.

Her clearest formulated wish was the desire to see Lalli again, and alone, if it

were only for a moment. It seemed as if the merest word, a look even, would be sufficient to dissipate this wretched sense of discomfort, which was like something in the air. It prevented her now from listening in any appreciable degree to Ristori's reading of Leopardi's Hymn to Italy. At any other time that cry of impassioned and resolute despair would have touched her "like the strong broken spirit of a wave," with power to stir her ardent imagination to all far-reaching impulses of pity and enthusiastic devotion. Now the words seemed meaningless and remote as the ceaseless roll of carriage-wheels outside a sick-room. There could, one would imagine, be no more condemnatory criticism of the quality of a personal emotion than this—that it has shut

one apart from the influence of what is vital to other human beings.

She did not see Lalli again that night. At the very moment that she was sitting there, her soft round cheek resting upon her hand, her eyes fixed upon the bunch of flowers on her lap, while her mind busied itself with constructing the most satisfactory detail of their next meeting later on—for naturally they would be thrown together again in the course of the evening—Lalli was walking rapidly away through the silent moonlit street.

He was walking into the very heart of old Rome; past the deep-set silent spaces of the Forum, filled at this hour with a wan reflected radiance, so that the groups of delicate fluted columns rose lightly as if by

enchantment into the silvery light, and the wild cloud-shadows of the windy March night flitted rapidly like ghosts across the worn marbles of the floor. He passed the Palace of the Cæsars ; a nightingale was singing in the gardens. It was in the years before the Government had acquired an intelligent interest in antiquity, and there was still a double row of trees left standing where now we have the privilege of gazing upon an excavated road, and being confirmed in all our previous conceptions of Roman highways. Here, too, on that spring night, the wind was astir in the branches, and the shadows of the young leaves filled the long rustling avenue with a transparent shade. He stood beneath the Arch of Constantine ; there was light enough to follow

out the worn tracery of the triumphal bas-relief. Lalli sat down with his back to it. He could hardly have explained himself why he had chosen to come there. It was, he felt vaguely, what would have been appropriate to the hero of a French novel. But the Frenchman would undoubtedly have extracted some satisfaction—moral, immoral, or purely artistic—from the contemplation of the vast broken sweep of the Coliseum, seen under that effect of wildly shifting sky. Lalli looked at it with quite unaffected indifference. If anyone had been there to see him he would have been perfectly aware of the picturesque relief of his handsome arrogant profile against the moon-whitened stones, but he was far too simple-minded, at once too primitive and too prac-

tical, to have felt at any time the propriety of adopting a mental *pose*. He was sensitive and responsive only in matters of personal contact. He had never in his life conceived of an impersonal emotion. He stood unmoved before this great gaping ruin —this hungry old mouth of death; this visible type of Rome—blood-stained and empty. And to him it signified simply nothing; this place of fierce pleasures, this place of great agonies was like any other.

If you will not pity him for this insensibility—and what exile can be more tragic than this complacent acceptance of the lesser impressions of life?—it may be well to remind you that he still had one potent claim left upon your sympathy—he was very much in love with Barbara, and he had begun

to despair of ever counting for anything in her life.

He had taken off his hat and laid it down upon the stones beside him. He stayed there for a long while, not knowing exactly where else to go. Everything seemed alike idle, distasteful, miserable. It never for an instant occurred to him to rebel against the sensation. Being in love, and hopelessly, seemed to him as much a fact calculated to disturb the ordinary tenor of his existence as if he had broken his arm in falling from his horse. He was indeed extremely unhappy.

## CHAPTER XII.

HARDINGE was sauntering slowly down the Via del Venti Settembre. It was a favourite walk of his. He liked the quaint simplicity of some of its little churches ; he found pleasure in its long straight line of perspective, its suggestion of repose and exclusiveness. To him there was some secret and peculiar charm in the high-placed orange-trees of the Barbarini villa, and in the blind walls and silent convent-doors. The pleasure he took in it was something purely personal. For it is interesting, no doubt, to be walking easily on a soft

spring afternoon along the very line of Nero's panic-stricken flight, past the high-walled gardens where Cardinal Bembo and the Humanists of Rome met and discoursed of all the bright new enthusiasms of the Renaissance, and in those early April days the Roman stillness had yet the added charm of contrast; and to drive to the Porta Pia, to look at the scars and breaches made by the Italian cannon, was still one of the ordinary duties impressed upon the tourist mind. But to Hardinge's fancy the attraction lay farther on. A dozen yards beyond the brown old gates the pavement begins again. The walls are lower; if one is idle one can sit down upon the parapet and look across fields of corn and cane to a far blue range of hills and away and across

the great rolling sweep of the Campagna. Hardinge had spent hours in this fashion. He liked lounging upon the low stone wall in the sunshine, within hearing of the lazy talk of the soldiers and custom-house officers standing about the city gate ; he liked looking up the broad road to Sant Agnese. It is a quarter for priests and convents. At times a cardinal's carriage would roll heavily by ; Hardinge liked to watch it ; he liked to observe the measured opening of the carriage-door, the slow descent of the black-robed ecclesiastic, the decorous mien of the sable-clad attendants. He found a delightful quality in the impression such a group made upon him. He did not resent the existence of the state of things implied as Lexeter would have done ; his keen practical mind

derived a certain pleasure from the contemplation of the machinery of the Church. It interested him. When, in the course of his walks, he came across such a little procession defiling blackly across the sunny open road he greeted it with an air of friendly amusement. "I bow to the established order of things. I take off my hat to method and organisation," he said to Lexeter one day when they were walking together. He had made friends in the course of his wanderings about Rome with a certain Padre Bonifazio, one of the professors at the Propaganda, who had been recommended to Hardinge as a remarkable Greek scholar. Padre Bonifazio was from a little country town near Perugia. He was a man of about forty, with a fat and rather

common face, full of a certain simple good-nature, and large brown eyes, pathetic and beseeching like the eyes of a dog. He often went to Hardinge's rooms to read with him. Often Hardinge would do nothing but talk. Padre Bonifazio belonged to a church whose revenues had been confiscated by the Italian Government. He was reduced to extreme poverty, which he endured with the patient stoicism of a peasant. His great passion, after Greek, was shooting. When he was describing some expedition after snipe across the Campagna marshes, or a day's duck-shooting and the supper at night in a little osteria celebrated for its white wine, his eyes would fill with golden light, his face beamed with broad good-natured smiles, he thrust back his hanging black sleeves, and—"The water

was *so* deep," he would say, gathering up the worn skirts of his shabby cassock, "and cold. Eh, eh ! but those were good times, Signor 'Ardinge."

The young man was in the habit of keeping him for dinner. He amused himself by making tea for his guest in the evening. The padre considered it in the light of a medicinal beverage ; he took a childish pleasure and pride in absorbing huge quantities of it, emptying the sugar-basin into his cup, and taking a pinch of snuff between each swallow. Sometimes Lexeter, coming home late at night, would still find the two sitting before the fire, the padre perhaps dozing gently, with his blue-and-white checked pocket-handkerchief spread carefully over his knee, his fat hands folded softly together,

and a placid air of satisfaction—the effect of unwonted food, and warmth, and light—pervading his whole being. Hardinge would be seated in the opposite armchair, smoking, or buried over some book ; from time to time he lifted his eyes from its pages, and his keen and somewhat sarcastic glance would fall upon his companion's large unconscious form, and rest there with a curious expression of mingled amusement and reflection.

“I call you an argument in favour of the endowment of Research. You are not a bad sort of fellow after all, Hardinge. It is not every social naturalist who provides for his insects after pinning them,” Lexeter observed, coming in later than usual one evening. Lexeter was always late in his

hours. His entrance was the signal for Padre Bonifazio's departure. The good-natured priest was ill at ease with Lexeter. If they spoke much together he became confused ; he would stand smiling, rubbing his forehead gently with the blue checked pocket-handkerchief while Lexeter made the most inoffensive remarks.

“ *Già, già.* But I depart. I remove the obstacle ; *gli levo l'incommodo,*” he said, at the first possible opportunity.

“ I don't call the dear old boy an insect ; he is my favourite sea-anemone. You find him a little gray spot of hardness ; you don't know how he blossoms out in safe quarters,” Hardinge observed, laughing.

It was a matter of course to this young fellow that he should be liked wherever he

was known ; it was nothing new, it was a common fact—like the daylight. He was continually aware of giving pleasure. And to be young, to be not yet three-and-twenty, to be conscious of a degree of cleverness which gave one the right to be critical concerning the quality of one's experiences, to feel oneself an interesting—a delightful ingredient of life—and yet to be free from all uneasy conceit, all sense of straining effort, what could he have asked for more ? Lulled by the warm fitful stirring of the wind, his eyes filled with the colour of the spring day, his thoughts moved about easily, seeming only made to rest upon agreeable objects, and that lightly. For instance, he thought of Octave, but she would hardly have been gratified could she have seen the

incipient smile which filled his eyes as he remembered some words which he had been reading.

“ Francesco Sforza was used to say that there are three cases in life wherein human wisdom availeth little,” he murmured softly, looking towards a waving patch of golden-tinted canes. “ Should one desire to take unto oneself a wife, to buy a horse, or invest in a melon, the wise man will recommend himself to Providence and draw his bonnet down over his eyes.”

He looked confidentially over at the reeds rising straightly up into the burning sunshine. “ I am King Midas. I am growing classical,” he thought. Octave would certainly not have liked it, but there was perfect contentment upon the young fellow’s face

as he lounged upon his sunny wall that afternoon. Sometimes he lay back, clasping his hands behind his head in his favourite attitude, and staring up at the deep limpid softness of the sky; sometimes he turned his eyes towards the peaceful blue lines of the hills. At one moment the sound of footsteps on the road made him change the direction of his glance; even at this distance there seemed something familiar in the air and gait of the approaching figure. He looked again, and rose lightly to his feet with some slight exclamation of surprise. He had recognised Miss Floyd in this solitary quick-stepping pedestrian.

She was walking rapidly along, with her face turned away from him and her eyes fixed upon the distant fields. He was

standing close beside her, he spoke before she was aware of his presence, and then she started suddenly and stood still. The colour rushed to her face.

“ Did I frighten you ? But I am glad I met you. I was waiting for the gods to send me a companion. We can walk out towards Saint Agnese together,” he said confidently, thrusting his hands into his pockets and looking at her with a pleased and friendly air.

He had always liked Barbara. He had only heard Lexeter speak of her once ; but even on that solitary occasion he had been struck by his tone of admiration and respect. And since Octave’s confidences at the opera he had always felt a little curious.

He suggested now that they should have

a walk through some lanes which he had lately discovered and which were close at hand.

“I came out by myself,” began Barbara, looking at him doubtfully.

The fact was that Margherita had been making some observations to which it had not pleased the young girl to listen. Now, as she remembered them, her cheeks flushed again. Hardinge stood looking at her. “After all, we are Americans, you know,” he said smiling.

The lanes to which he led the way turn sharply off from the Porta Pia, passing under the high old city walls. For two or three minutes they walked on in silence, then the narrow road took a sudden turn; a feeling of freshness, the breath of damp

earth, the smell of a wood filled the air about them. They walked between branching hedgerows, and trees leaned from the high steep banks until the branches met. The damp cool road was full of shadow-loving growths—great flat green leaves, ivy, and beds of rank coarse fern. And farther on, where the sunlight dappled the ground, the cyclamen grew in the moss, and there were violets. They had passed out of Rome, out of Italy, into the very heart of a leafy English lane.

“Ah!” said Barbara, drawing a long breath of satisfaction.

They moved on more slowly through the cool transparent shadow. It was all so still. A thrush was singing somewhere in the coverts.

“ It was Carson who discovered the place one day out sketching ; young Carson, the painter I was telling you about the other day.”

“ I know,” said Barbara ; “ the man from some little place out West.”

“ Ah,” said Hardinge, thrusting his stick into the rotten stump of a tree, “ he is uncommonly clever, I can tell you ; I should like to show you some little things he has done. There is a particular bit of distance a little farther on——”

They had come out upon higher ground. Behind them were the mossy stone gates of a farm. They went on a few paces, the road narrowed to a mere footpath. They were halfway up the side of a hill. They looked off upon miles of Campagna—a great sunny,

grassy sweep of rolling land. Beyond this rose the pale luminous profile of the Alban mountains, still snowy-crested above the olive groves. Here and there a white-walled village nestled in some folding of the hills. Nearer at hand were scattered villas, and formal avenues of cypress, and slender flat-topped pines. And above them rose a limpid stainless sky. The wide landscape was bathed and drowned in light—pure light—a tempered splendour.

Barbara had taken off her hat and gloves. They sat by the roadside together ; Hardinge had flung himself down on the long deep grass at her feet.

“ Confess that you are glad that I brought you here ! ” he demanded.

“ I am glad,” said Barbara softly.

A loose branch of wild rose was swaying in the wind above her uncovered head. The little leaves made shadows on her neck and hair. Hardinge looked up at her and smiled. They spoke together in undertones. He had begun telling her again about young Carson, and then their talk drifted away to a peasant who was labouring in the fields below them—the solitary bit of human life visible—a patient bowed figure of toil.

“There are some things I can never understand,” Hardinge remarked reflectively.

He picked up a bit of grass and examined it and began twisting it about his finger as he spoke. “Why expect gratitude and self-control, the supreme result of a tempered civilisation, from the lowest orders? People

are so horribly hard on each other. For myself I devoutly believe in the division of the world into a question of temperaments."

He put out his hand and caught one of the swaying branches of the rose-tree; he began stripping it mechanically of its leaves. Barbara glanced at him and half put out her hand and drew it back. He went on speaking.

"I believe too in the existence of the artistic temperament—the powerful impulse towards margin, luxury, the need of sensation—without the remotest hint of artistic expression. The same passionate feeling for life which makes a poet of one man can make a drunken navvy of another. I have seen a workman as extravagant on five shillings as his betters on a thousand pounds. I could never understand why extreme penury was

expected to include all the virtues? But people will never allow for differences of temperament below a certain income. Personality to them represents a taxable luxury—like powdered hair. No one cares to distinguish shades of difference in the drab-coloured dreariness of poverty."

"But are you never insensible yourself?" said Barbara, arching her eyebrows playfully. She looked at the scattered leaves on the ground. "See what you have been doing! and it was so happy growing there in the sun."

"Ah," said Hardinge, "if I had not been with you, I should have walked on and left the rose-bush growing. But two happy people always imply the misery of some shadowy third. That is one of those little beneficent arrangements——"

He stopped short and turned suddenly and broke the rose off close to the ground.

“ Give it to me. I will take it home and put it in water.”

“ And prolong its agony ? But of course you will, because you see it suffering. The chief result of having suffered a great deal seems to be the capacity for suffering more.”

“ At least of suffering for others,” said Barbara softly.

He looked at her. The ineffable languor and charm of the spring was all about them, in the warm fitful wind, in the stainless sky, in the very smell of the new grass at her feet. He looked at her. “ The day is so beautiful ! Is that wise ? ”

He began speaking of self-sacrifice—of its futility. “ I am an outsider, a Philistine ;

Lexeter is always telling me that I am a Philistine. I am the advocate of all the bourgeois facts and virtues," he said ; and then they both laughed. They felt very happy.

The afternoon slipped away as if by enchantment. "I must be going soon ; I promised Octave to stop there on my way home," Barbara observed at last. But even then it was some time before they moved. The sky was growing roseate at the horizon, and the pines cast long slender shadows on the grass. There was a sound of bells from the far white belfry of a convent ; and the voices of the labourers returning homeward came cheerfully across from the nearest farm.

The nightingales were singing loudly now.

in the thickets. They stood still to listen. There was a sound of light wheels, the slow footfall of a tired horse drawing nearer. "I did not know that anyone ever passed here," Barbara observed idly. She neither changed her attitude nor turned her head to look.

The man who was driving came up slowly behind them. He had seen and recognised them from a long distance. There was a break in the hedge now; a flood of golden light was pouring in, shining on Barbara's white hands, on Hardinge's uncovered head as he strolled along by her side. She was still holding the long trailing branch of leaves. The red dazzle was full upon both their faces as they turned and stood back to let the carriage pass them.

There was a rattle of wheels, a jerk, and the light trap rolled quickly away over the jagged cart-ruts.

“But—was that not——? Surely—surely I know that man’s face. It was Cavaliere Borgia. And he must have recognised us?” Barbara said slowly.

She was silent for a moment, and then the colour rose to her cheeks. “Do you suppose—— I wonder if he thought there was anything out of the way in my walking here with you, alone? Italians don’t, you know,” she said, looking gravely at him with an air of serious childlike confidence.

“But we are Americans,” said Hardinge promptly, meeting her glance of inquiry with perfect seriousness. Inwardly he was

raging at the impertinence to which she had been exposed.

He made a great effort to continue the conversation on its former footing ; but it was difficult not to speak with more warmth. The slight which had been offered her seemed to demand a certain counter-balancing emphasis of personal admiration. He insisted upon seeing her to the very door of the Damons' house. He walked away down the street, after bidding her farewell, tingling all over with fervid respect for this sweet gentle-natured creature, and a desire to go out and do battle for her sake. He was but three-and-twenty, remember ; and to fulfil the code of a lofty chivalry was one of the requisites necessary to his easy princely pleasure in being.

Barbara did not stay long at the Damons'. But something else had reached home before herself, and was awaiting her arrival.

“There is a letter awaiting the signorina,” Margherita explained ceremoniously, standing in the doorway with her hands wrapped up in her apron, and an ostentatious air of making an important statement. “It was left by Luigi, the manservant of the Signor Conte Lalli. I know no more. I have asked no questions. Since the signorina prefers walking alone and leaving me to spend hours in looking out of window for her, with my heart in my mouth, not knowing what might happen—— But, *basta così!* I have nothing more to say. And to think of the poor dear signor

padrone away there in Florence, little dreaming of the dangers the signorina—— But I say no more; no, not if I were asked in the confessional. Not another word. I hope I know my duty to the signorina better than to weary her by complaining.

She rolled her hands tighter in her apron, and the sentence ended huskily in a sob.

“Don’t, Margherita, there’s a good woman, don’t cry. I was not walking alone, Mr. Hardinge was with me. I was quite safe. And Mrs. Damon sent me home in a cab,” Barbara added rather hastily.

She sat down and pushed the soft loose hair back from her forehead, eyeing the letter on the table beside her. She felt no par-

ticular disinclination to read it ; but for the moment Lalli and all which concerned him seemed to have lost something of its actuality. She had been living in another mental atmosphere, on another side of her nature. It required an effort to return to the exact focus of interest in him.

But now she broke the seal. The note ran briefly as follows :

“ I cannot come to your father’s house after his treatment of me. Yet I should like to see you once more to say farewell. After what has passed, you will not be surprised to hear that I am going to fight a duel ; and something tells me that I shall not escape with my life. I am glad of it. I am sick of existence (*sono stufo di questa*

*vita*); you alone could have made it tolerable, and you would not. I do not reproach you —'tis fatality ; but I should like to see you once again. After that, what matters ? I would give you my life to amuse yourself with, as I would give you anything else which I had.

“I shall be on the Pincian to-morrow morning at seven o'clock. *Later than seven it will be too late.*

“CESCO LALLI.”

She laid the paper down very softly. She turned abruptly away, and walked over to the window and stood looking down into the street. It was growing dusk, but the sky was still reddened above the convent roof. A bell rang suddenly and sharply.

from the convent belfry. She could see its black vibrating silhouette against the rosy flush of the sky. And, possibly, at this same hour to-morrow night—— She pressed her hands, suddenly, hard against her face. She had just remembered that her father was away in Florence. Barbara was alone.

## CHAPTER XIII.

ONE of Mr. Floyd's few personal friends was a certain Monsieur Simon, an old Frenchman, an ex-officer of infantry, compromised in the *émeute* of '48 in Lyons, and now settled in Rome and teaching Latin and French at twenty sous the hour. No one knew his precise age ; he was probably about sixty, very large and robust. One could imagine that he had been handsome as a young man ; his eyes were dark and steady, and his thick gray hair was brushed away in heavy sculpturesque folds. A bitter and impotent sense of injustice had moulded all

his features. He contemplated the world with the unchanging despairing scorn of a tragic mask. He had always been in the right, and had always contrived to appear in the wrong; it was partly perhaps the fault of his intense and overbearing manner; in his own regiment he had been personally unpopular. When he was acquitted by court-martial, not a man stepped forward to shake hands with him. He left the court-room in the midst of an absolute silence. He spent a day and a night shut up in his quarters, with what thoughts Heaven only knows. At the end of that time he sent for his orderly to carry to the colonel his letter of resignation. He was still under forty when he sent in his papers and left the army, a marked man. For a little while he

remained in Lyons. Occasionally his old comrades met him in the streets, but he was never known to have given one of them the smallest sign of recognition. After some months he disappeared entirely—absolutely, like a stone dropped into deep water. Some people said that he was dead, others that he had gone to Algiers and enlisted as a Zouave under a false name. In fact, he had come to Italy. The journey there had exhausted what was left of his small savings. He tried many means of supporting himself. His exactitude, his perfect loyalty, his incorruptible honesty made of him a most valuable assistant, but his violent and suspicious nature invariably finished by rendering all relations to his employers intolerable. He ended by giving lessons.

His chief pupils were a family of little boys, the sons of a French wine merchant. He gave himself an incredible amount of trouble over his lessons, but he had not the gift of teaching. His daily bread was bread of bitterness.

He had never married. He lived alone in one large empty room at the top of a steep and dirty Roman staircase. What little attendance he required was given him by his landlady, but for the most part he did the greater share of the work himself; rising very early in the gray morning to make up his bed, and sweep out his room, and prepare the coffee for his scanty breakfast. The tragic absurdity of his position was never more apparent than at these moments. To see him solemnly proceed to

dust his chamber, an old foraging-cap upon his head, a narrow and faded dressing-gown buttoned tightly about him, without relaxing a muscle or changing for an instant the gloomy defiance of his severe countenance, it was impossible to avoid laughing. For all his life the old man had never been able to do anything easily ; his deepest misfortunes were never allowed to rise above the level of the ridiculous. As a rule he carefully avoided meeting any of his countrymen. The only house which he frequented was Mr. Floyd's. On Sunday he brushed his coat more carefully than ever. He always went to the Protestant Church. He had been brought up as a Roman Catholic ; his family at one time had been possessed of some interest in the Church, but in that,

as in everything else, he had gone against the current. He read the Bible constantly. He had also an edition of Racine; some volumes of music, of which he was passionately fond; and a complete collection of Victor Hugo's works. A little cracked plaster cast of the poet as he appeared in '48, and a violin, were almost the only records the old ex-officer had left of his former life.

Lexeter was the first stranger who had ever been admitted to his room. They had met in the beginning at Mr. Floyd's house, and Lexeter had soon acquired the habit of dropping in at odd hours to light his pipe and talk. Monsieur Simon never smoked.

On one of these occasions lately Lexeter had found the old man sitting before his

little work-table gazing helplessly and painfully at the pile of blotted copy-books he held in his swollen and trembling old hands. He had had an attack of fever in the night, but had risen as usual, and was even now laboriously striving to accomplish his daily task-work.

It was not without difficulty that Lexeter persuaded him to return to his bed. For several days he violently and successfully opposed calling any doctor in, but at the end of that time he suddenly collapsed. His old dogged determination gave way in one moment. It was one night when Lexeter was sitting by his bedside ; the old man had been lying speechless and motionless for more than an hour. Above his bed there hung a small framed photograph of

Barbara, taken when she was a child. It was the only ornament in the room. Lexeter was looking at it musingly, lost in thought, when a sudden movement in the bed attracted his attention. The old man had half risen on one elbow ; his steady piercing eyes were fixed on Lexeter.

“She is good,” he said painfully. “It is a true heart, a faithful soul.”

He lifted one heavily-veined hand from the coverlet ; he raised it feebly, still looking at Lexeter.

“*Vous l'aimez bien, n'est ce pas?* And you, too, love her ?” he murmured.

Lexeter hesitated a moment.

“ Yes,” he said gravely.

Monsieur Simon contemplated him for an instant in silence. An ineffable expression

of sweetness had come over his rugged features. “*Elle est si bonne. Je l’ai bien aimée, moi,*” he murmured again, sinking back upon his pillow.

When next he spoke it was to ask that a doctor should be summoned. To Lexeter’s astonishment he proved a most docile patient. Even in delirium the old soldier’s instincts of obedience and punctuality never entirely forsook him.

Once or twice, when the fever was at its worst, Lexeter remained with him until daybreak. The night of the day on which Barbara and Hardinge walked in the lanes together was one of these occasions. It was after six o’clock when Lexeter left the old man’s room. The fresh morning air tasted like wine after the strain and fatigue of the

night's watching. Lexeter directed his steps towards the Pincian hill. It was a crisp cool morning. The air was chilled and vivified by the rain. The sky looked blue, intensely blue, like enamel, stained with large white clouds, clear-edged, as if they had been painted there. The sun shone brightly on the vacant spaces and deserted gravel walks; here and there a gardener was already awake and at work among the bushes. Small birds were hopping about the garden-paths; they flew away with a quick flutter of wings at Lexeter's approach. All the spring world was fresh and alert and vital. The coolness of the dawn still lingered on the leaves.

Lexeter threw himself down on a retired bench in front of a bust of Leopardi. He

began by taking off his hat and lighting a cigar. He had a late copy of the newspaper for which he wrote in his pocket. He unfolded it leisurely and glanced up and down the columns, but a singular deadness, a flatness as of a worn-out tale seemed to pervade its pages. He began to think of old Simon ; of Barbara's photograph ; of what the doctor had said——

A young German couple, come to spend their honeymoon in Rome, passed close before him. They were taking an early constitutional preparatory to a day's work among the museums. The girl was rather pretty. She looked at him with shy kindly blue eyes from under the broad rim of her hat. There was something in her smile which reminded him of Barbara. It was three days now, he

reflected, since he had been to call at the Floyds'. He would go there this afternoon. The commonest politeness required as much as that of him. He would go about five o'clock, when he was sure of finding her in. He would go to carry her news of Monsieur Simon. The old man's look and tone of tenderness recurred to him. "Ah, yes, *elle est bien bonne*," he murmured.

He stooped to pick up the paper which had fallen, rustling, from his knees to the ground. As he lifted his head, the first person his eyes rested upon was Barbara herself. She was alone, she was coming rapidly towards him. Her face was very pale. She was looking straight at him and smiling. He had time to see all this as he rose to his feet.

She stood still in front of him. She did not give him her hand. The smile seemed fixed upon her lips.

“I was crossing over there,” she said, without any preliminary greeting, raising her hand for a moment and then letting it fall heavily to her side. She kept her large clear eyes upon his face. “I saw you from the farther side. You did not see me.” She hesitated for an instant. “I did not like to be here without you knowing it. I did not expect to see you.”

“I am going away,” Lexeter said hastily. He carefully avoided looking at her. What he felt was an indescribable mixture of pain, of humiliation, and sorrow.

“I did not know you came here in the morning,” Barbara went on. There was a

slight tremor in her low full voice which thrilled through him like a touch of physical anguish. He told her how he had been spending the night.

She clasped her hands together quickly, For the first time the fixed smile left her pale lips.

“And you do not believe he will get better ?”

“Better perhaps. I hope so—I believe so. But probably he will never be quite himself again. Practically, he has done with life. It is a hard world. It has been a hard world for him,” said Lexeter, with sudden bitterness.

She stood silent for a moment, looking at the ground. When she lifted her face her lips were quivering.

“I should like you to know, Mr. Lexeter—I wish you would believe—oh, don’t you understand? I saw you a long way off, and I came to tell you that I was here,” said poor Barbara, putting her hand up to her lips and looking at him appealingly. “I cannot tell you why I am here. It is not my secret. But I thought it was best. I *had* to come.” She turned her head away abruptly. “I thought that you would understand,” she said.

“Ah!” said Lexeter, making an involuntary movement backwards. The revulsion of feeling was so strong that for a minute he could find no terms in which to express himself. He took her hand in his, and, for the only time in his life, he kissed it.

"There is nothing which you are capable of doing or thinking which I do not approve of, my dear," he said simply. And then with sudden uncontrollable passion of regret and infinite tenderness: "God bless you, little Barbara!" he said.

He purposely avoided looking after her. He stood, when she left him, staring at the bust of Leopardi. Here, in this presence, the most passionate desire of his life had fallen down—dead. The mute marble gaze of the dead young poet seemed watching him as he turned and passed away.

Barbara crossed over to the opposite avenue. Lalli was seated there on a bench waiting for her. He rose at her approach. He too was pale, but at the sound of her

footstep a smile of triumph had passed like light into his eyes.

“Barbara!”

Their eyes met. Barbara began to tremble violently. This was not what she had expected.

“Take my arm. You are frightened. There is nothing to frighten you, dearest.” He drew her hand under his arm. “I will take you to where there is no chance of your being seen,” he said.

He led her to a seat farther away, on the hillside. Here there was a clear space of grass, and then a ring of fir-trees shutting in the round shallow basin of a fountain. The wind scarcely stirred the dark tops of the pines. There was no sound but the sound of their own footsteps on the freshly-laid

gravel. The water of the fountain rose and fell again in one smooth, glittering, noiseless arch. She followed passively, as in some dream. The very fact of their being there together, alone, at that hour of the morning, cast a spell of unreality about her. It was impossible to speak.

They sat down. Barbara was holding her closed parasol with both hands. After a moment he took it gently away from her, still without speaking. He laid it down upon the bench beside him, and turned and covered her cold and trembling fingers with his own warm hand.

“Dearest!”

She lifted her eyes slowly to his face.

“I knew that you would come.—Because

you love me," Lalli murmured, with a long pause between the words.

"I——," she disengaged one hand abruptly and pressed it hard against her lips. Why was she here then if she did not love him ? She fixed her gaze upon the glittering sinuous motion of the fountain. She tried to collect her thoughts, but they glided imperceptibly away from her ; she could realise nothing, feel nothing, but the power of his dark appealing gaze.

There was a nearing sound of voices, but Lalli did not change his attitude. An elderly man and his wife, Italian shopkeepers by their appearance, emerged suddenly from between the trees. The woman was holding the leading-strings attached to a little child, her grandchild apparently. The little boy

ran forward with a cry of delight to the glittering water. He was dressed in a knitted costume of blue-and-white wool. As he stood with his back to them Barbara could see that his sturdy little legs were encased in stockings of different colours.

“Andiamo. *C'è gente. Veni, Peppino, non far il cattivo!* (Don't be naughty),” the grandmother said, with an admonitory tug at the strings. The toddling creature passed close in front of Barbara. Lalli had not moved his hand. The child stood still, gazing at them with round expressionless eyes.

“Andiamo !” the woman repeated. The old man was resting, leaning on his stick. He started at the word like a horse which feels the whip.

The little procession passed away behind the trees. They neither of them referred to it, and yet each felt tacitly that the commonplace passage of these people had been an event.

Barbara was the first to speak.

“I came because you wrote to me. Because you were in trouble. I came to help you. You—you wrote to me that you were going to fight a duel,” she said, with increasing agitation.

He did not answer immediately. He appeared to ignore her agitation.

“You are so beautiful. I know that you love me. Say that you love me, Barbara !” he said entreatingly.

And then, for an instant, she realised how utterly circumstances had passed beyond her

control. For the first time she was aware of the crushing pressure of a stronger and more unscrupulous nature. Two large tears rose slowly to her eyes. She turned to him instinctively, like a frightened child.

“ But indeed I believed that I could help you by coming. You know you said that I could be to you like your sister,” she said entreatingly. But she felt herself the futility of such pleading. What had she to oppose to his tenacity of will? “ Pray, pray tell me what has happened to you,” she said.

“ I have insulted Borgia. He said that he had met you outside of Rome, walking alone with Hardinge at nightfall. I gave him the lie,” Lalli answered half indifferently.

“But it was true. Oh, what can I do !” she said, looking at him helplessly. She felt that all her future could only be decided by his answer.

“What does it matter now ?” he asked.

He took both her hands into one of his, and with the other he pressed her cheek gently down against his shoulder.

“You know that you love me, Barbara—Barbara *mia*,” he said.

Half an hour later, as they were parting, she unfastened a ribbon about her throat, and drew from under her dress a large old-fashioned gold locket.

“It is my own hair when I was a baby. Mamma put it there. It is like giving you all my old life as well, Cesco,” she said softly.

He paid no attention to what she was saying. He was looking at her flushed face with a passionate delight.

“You are so beautiful!” he told her, stooping down to kiss the soft white hands fastening the trinket to his watch-chain.

Already there was difference in their emotion.

But as they stood hand-in-hand, looking at each other, it was difficult not to believe in future happiness for these two young creatures. Each was so sure of the other. It was a sacramental moment of life.

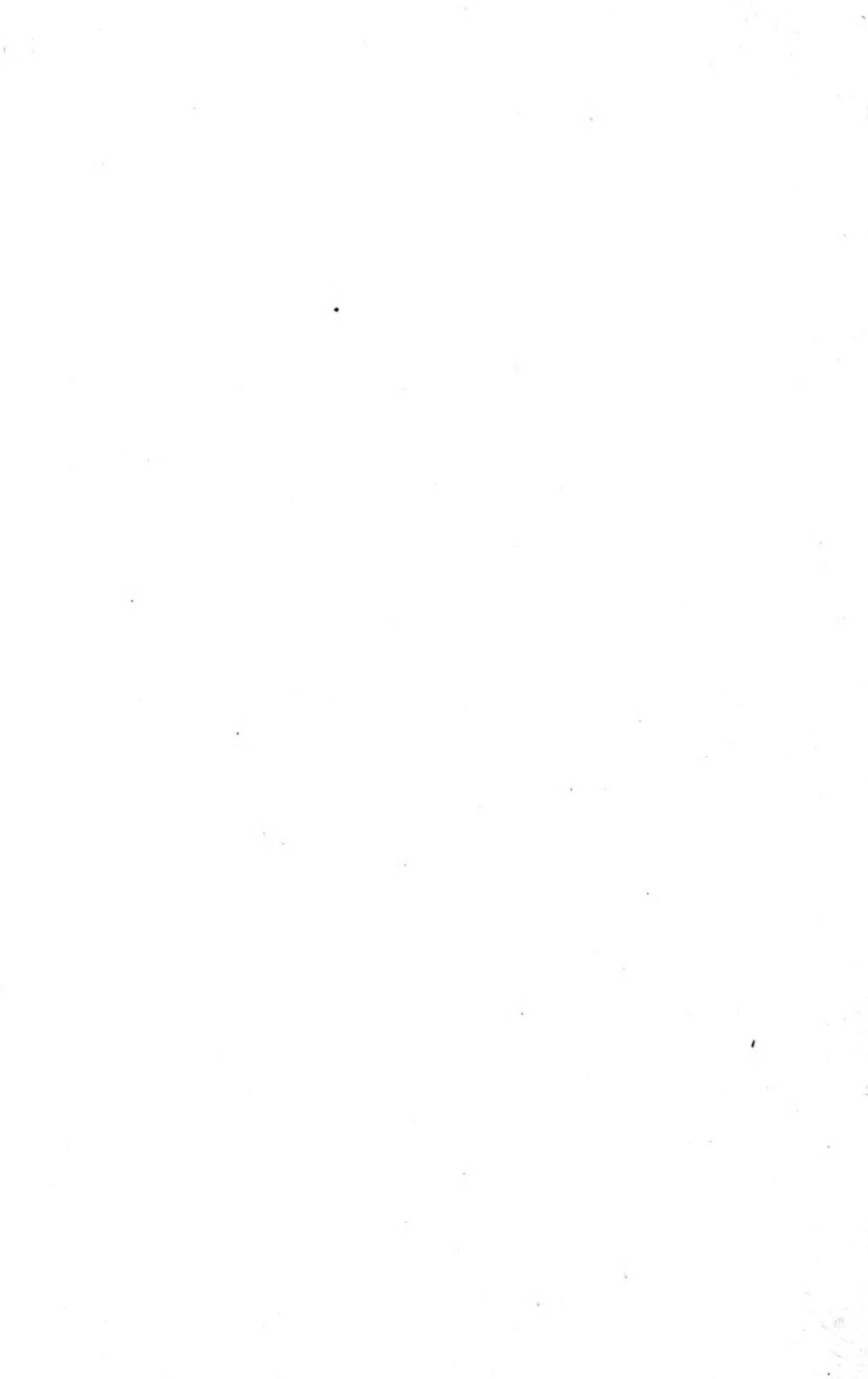


Book **EE.**  
IN DEEP WATERS.

“ Ah, then we awoke with a sudden start  
From our deep dream, and saw, too late,  
How bare the rock, how desolate,  
On which we had cast our precious freight.”

BROWNING.

. . . . “ Ce que vaut un tel rêve,  
Et quel est le néant d'un avenir fini ! ”  
VICTOR HUGO—*Ode à Napoléon.*



## CHAPTER I.

DISAPPOINTMENT is not hardest to bear in its first moments. It is not while newly awakened energy is strong to struggle that loss is least endurable. Surely to know the very bitterness of sorrow it must be resting, a lifeless weight, upon the life it crushes. For trouble is perhaps never so intolerable as when it is taken for granted ; one's own acceptance of deprivation growing more difficult in mathematical proportion to the acquiescence of one's neighbours. And let us not fall into the common error of estimating suffering by its apparent intensity ;

I think it highly probable that there have been martyrs who would have found it impossible to submit to chronic rheumatism.

I chose therefore to show you Barbara again, when more than a year has elapsed from the time of her marriage, rather than to ask you to contemplate with me those earlier months of mental doubt, and stress, and slow readjustment. On this breathless August afternoon, when we find her again, in her favourite resting-place, beside the willow-bordered stream which flows past the door of her new home, it is probable that, of all the circle of people whom her marriage in any way affected, she is the only one left who still considers that any vital change can yet take place in her experience and view of life.

And to Barbara's eyes the subtle deadening spell of habit has already begun to weave its charm about her, making her find companionship and a sense of common association in the murmur of the water and the familiar roundness of the grassy hills.

The Lallis had only spent one month in Rome since their marriage. It had been Barbara's wish that they should settle at his house in the country. On one occasion—it was some two or three weeks before the wedding-day—they had ridden out with Mr. Floyd to look at this place, half manor-house and half farm, which had belonged to Cesco's mother. It was a long, low, stone building, enclosing three sides of an empty courtyard. The house had once been painted white. At one end a flight of wooden steps

led up to a wide verandah, with four wooden pillars, painted to imitate marble, from which the stucco had long since peeled away. From this verandah you entered directly upon an immense hall, with cross-beams overhead, and innumerable small windows. One end of this hall had been partitioned off years ago, as a sort of boudoir. A heavy faded silk curtain hung across the entrance, and within were faded chairs of the style of the Empire, and a narrow straight-backed sofa and working-table drawn into the embrasure of the farther window. A row of family portraits hung high up against the wall; the most noticeable among them was the portrait of a young woman with dark eyes, in the dress of forty years ago. The artist had

painted her against a background of blue sky, smiling agreeably and looking at a rose.

“ That was my mother ; it was done before her marriage,” Cesco said, following the direction of Barbara’s glance.

“ Ah ! Do you know she reminds me a little of your cousin, your beautiful cousin whom I met at Bracciano ; don’t you remember ? There is certainly a family likeness. Or don’t you see it ? Perhaps you know your cousin’s face too well to understand what I mean ? ”

“ *Regina* is married now,” Lalli said. And then he added hurriedly : “ But you have only to tell me what changes you will have made. Here is my mother’s private oratory.”

He opened the door of a very small whitewashed room. The altar had been stripped of all its decorations ; there was only a series of square marks on the wall where the sacred images had hung ; and in one corner the dead woman's *prie dieu* was resting with its face to the wall.

“ I remember the last time I came here. I have not seen this place since I was a boy. What will you do with it ? It will be of no use to you like this.”

“ I should like it kept as your mother left it,” Barbara said softly. She went up and laid her hand upon the bare boards. The dust lay thick beneath her fingers. The sun-warmed air came in at the open doorway like the living breath of a younger world.

“ You shall do what you like with that --with me—with everything,” Cesco said, looking into her face and laying his strong hand for a moment upon hers.

“ I shall do what you like,” Barbara said shyly.

He clasped her hand more firmly across the empty altar. Neither of them knew how long they stood in that way. Who can measure the duration of a pulse of happiness ?

But presently, when they had strolled out again into the tepid spring afternoon, Lalli began to speak more in detail of their future plan of living. “ As for myself, I should ask for nothing better than to live with you on a desert island for all the days of my life,” he said. “ You are all I can

ever wish for. But in this dull place, you will feel the change, Barbara."

He looked down absently at the stream flowing past their feet. They were standing in a small grassy enclosure, which had been planted out as a sort of summer bower in the days of Cesco's grandfather. There was still a formal circle of ilexes, which yet showed traces in their uncouth shapes of years of former clipping ; there was a stone bench yet standing, and a round stone table supported by a griffin, and in one corner of the enclosure the broken statue of a nymph leaned over the discoloured marble basin of a fountain, into which a few drops of water were for ever trickling from the shattered urn. The trees and underbrush had been cleared away to the water's edge ;

across the little stream, as far as one could see, were rolling waving fields of wheat, whitening and shining with the sun and wind.

“I have told your father that I did not care for any dowry—any money,” Lalli added suddenly, sitting down on the edge of the table and looking up at her.

“No,” said Barbara simply. And then she added, turning her eyes towards him gratefully: “You knew that my father would have to go to America for that, and that there would be some business arrangements connected with poor mamma’s fortune which—which would hurt him. It is very good of you to spare him. It is so good to feel that our happiness does not mean anyone else’s pain, is it not?”

“ You are an angel ! ” said Cesco, looking at her passionately. It made very little difference to him what she said. Any words spoken in those soft caressing tones were adorable. And as for Mr. Floyd’s money, he felt that he had comported himself throughout that interview in a manner which would have appeared striking and chivalric to any audience. He had acted *en vrai gentilhomme*. And, later on, such affairs always arranged themselves. For one thing, time reduced them to questions of business. But that was no reason for depriving oneself of the pleasure of having expressed noble sentiments. But perhaps the greatest drawback to disinterested eloquence lies in the memories of the hearers. For instance, that same morning,

in speaking of some of his new arrangements, Lalli had mentioned Marcantonio Borgia.

“Because he was once your dearest friend, I wish I could help disliking him,” Barbara said thoughtfully. And then some sudden impulse made her ask: “Did it ever occur to you that he was in love with your beautiful cousin—with *Regina*?”

“Why?” asked Lalli calmly.

“Oh, from the way he spoke of her once. And she is so very beautiful. I think I never saw anyone so beautiful. I should be in love with her myself if I were a man.”

“You see all men are not of your opinion. *I* am in love with *you*,” said Lalli playfully. “But,” he added, “you need not see Borgia again unless you like.” .

“ But I thought he was your best friend. And surely you will not let me come between you and the people you have always cared about ? ” she said earnestly.

“ Is there any friend like you ? ” Lalli asked, standing up, bending his handsome head, and kissing the palm of her hand.

And then, as they walked together towards the house, he added carelessly : “ You know I have told you that my cousin is married. Her husband is one of the new deputies. They will soon be living in Rome. See, there is your father looking for us ! ”

These were some of the words Barbara remembered. However changed their relations to one another, moments such as these had existed between them, moments of sacramental faith and enthusiasm. This

memory served now as warning. Those emotions indeed were dead—they were ghosts; but ghosts can act as guardians to a tomb.

To Barbara's loving and loyal nature it seemed sufficient that such things had been. The light of that spring morning was not more irrecoverable. But she dreaded nothing now so much as what might seem to desecrate that past.

For the last two or three days, she had been alone at the *tenuta*. Lalli had driven into Rome—on business. It had become his custom to go there more and more frequently of late. And Barbara was glad of anything which seemed to provide him with interest and occupation. She was expecting his return; from where she sat she could see

a small distant piece of the road by which the carriage must pass. Everywhere else her eye rested upon great rolling fields of grain. It was mid-August. The afternoon sky was of a hard purplish blue. The trees were dark, and thick, and motionless. On the opposite hill, in the sunshine, the corn was ablaze with scarlet poppies, and dusky patches of lupin, and rank-white daisies of the second growth. Under the willows the little stream ran low, half-choked with the rank exuberance of the water-flags. Nature was in one of her practical housewifely phases; at this season she ceased to be a goddess. The sweet irresponsibility of spring, the glad rioting of early summer, were alike forgotten; a healthy, steady, unbroken intention of growth, and abundance, and repletion

was expressed by all the country side. The woods about the house were the only trees for miles around. There was no village in sight—only one field of ripening grain following another.

In this afternoon silence, Barbara could hear the voices of the men about the stables, the voices of two peasants trudging along the road on the opposite side of the river ; the distant barking of a dog. Then silence again, the heavy silence of prosperous inaction. There was nothing now to do but wait until the harvest was ripened.

Once the stillness was broken by the sound of slow-moving wheels. A yoke of oxen, huge white creatures with long, shining, curved horns, “serene moving animals, teaching content,” such as she had often seen in the

streets of Rome when she was a girl, passed close beside her bower, dragging an empty hay-cart. The driver touched his battered hat.

“A beautiful day for the crops, signora contessa !”

And then again all was silent but the hot buzzing sound of a bee beyond the ilex-trees, in the sunshine, and the monotonous drip, drip of the fountain watched over by the broken-armed nymph.

“I suppose that the others are living somewhere ?” she said to herself once or twice vaguely. But there was nothing in her surroundings to awaken any desire for sharing in a fuller sense of life. What could the meeting of her old friends and companions lead to but a more perfect understanding of the limitations of her

future? Each time she had seen her father of late it had been more difficult to part from him composedly. And she shrank with terror from any question which might lead to criticisms of the past.

“What I care for, more than I care for anything else, is to keep that safe,” she thought, clasping her hands together and looking down at the silent brown water. She choked back a half sob, but there was no one to hear her. There was no one to see how piteously childish she looked with the great tears gathering slowly on her lashes. “This has only come to me while I am very young. That is all the difference. Sorrow comes to everyone. I have always known that. Why, even Mr. Hardinge told me that,” she said, half smiling.

But the recollection of that careless, happy companionship of theirs, under the spring trees, on that memorable walk, made the present contrast too poignant. It was like looking back at all possibilities of tender devotedness and ardent admiration from across a grave. Hairdinge was inextricably associated in her mind with all the ideals which at one time had seemed to give life its meaning. One day, not long after their marriage, Lalli had offered to show her an old packet of love-letters—the relics of one of his dead-and-gone passions. She had refused with a sort of terror to look at them, and since then she had always sedulously tried to forget it, but at moments like these the remembrance returned with a sickening force.

“But all men are not like that. They are not!” she protested to herself with passionate conviction. And Hardinge’s clear-eyed, resolute young face rose up distinctly before her. There was something in the recollection of it which seemed to give a bright, disdainful, smiling denial to the conclusion that all men were alike base and forgetful. And then in keen reaction came the frightened sense that it was her own husband she was judging. She sat quite still, striving to check her sobs, as if it were some other woman’s pain which she was watching. It was only wise to give up expectation. It was enough if she could still keep some hold of habit, some affection born of common interest, upon his heart. She was not anxious for herself; she felt no

personal dread of disloyalty ; for her, life was too completely ended. But she dreaded some new movement of her husband's which should shatter at one blow past and present, and poison even memory with doubt. It was turning the sacredness of life into a hideous farce if he ceased to love her.

Hitherto she had been saved from that bitterness of soul which is the one irreparable curse of life—the sin against the Holy Ghost within us. She waited now, until the warm air had dried the tears upon her cheeks, and then she arose slowly and walked towards the house. It seemed easier to meet her husband there, in the first impulse of this new rush of tenderness, than where every sound and sight served to remind her of her effort. In this hot weather, the old

contessa's faded boudoir was still the coolest room in the house. They habitually sat there now in the evening. She looked up from force of habit as she drew back the curtain at the portrait of Lalli's mother on the wall. The two faces made a curious contrast—one warm and living, all flushed and tremulous with tears, the other simpering agreeably through its dimmed paint, and gazing at a rose with rococo philosophy.

But, just then, Barbara felt that even a portrait might be a misrepresentation.

## CHAPTER II.

WHEN her husband's carriage drew up at the door she did not hurry forward to meet him as had been her custom, not caring to expose herself to the curious eyes of the groom. And perhaps it was well that she hesitated, for the delay gave her time to catch sight of the face of a second arrival. She saw another man get down heavily from the *caretta*, and heard his voice making some casual remarks about the horses. It was the face and voice of Cavaliere Borgia.

She rose with an impulse of uncontrollable indignation, and walked halfway across the

room ; then stopped. Where was she going ? She sat down again with her back to the door, so as to avoid having to look up as her husband entered.

He knew by her very attitude how she was disposed to resent the breaking of what had been a tacit understanding between them from the first ; and even as he bent down to kiss her he had time to resolve that he would have no explanation on the subject. He knew that Barbara could be trusted not to make a public exhibition of her displeasure ; and he was desirous of keeping quite clear of anything which would force him into asserting his mastery unpleasantly. He had several requests to make of his wife.

“ I have brought you a visitor, Barbara

*mia.* You have not forgotten Marcantonio Borgia?" he said aloud.

It made very little difference to him that she turned pale and shrank away imperceptibly from his kiss. Life was spectacular to Cesco ; and when he had seen the same play too often it bored him. It was his wife who bored him now. But, to do him justice, there was no indication whatever of this in his manner at the present juncture. When Barbara looked at him she was struck at once by what seemed on his part like a return to a former condition of things. His air, the tone of his voice, his dress even, had undergone modification. He looked younger, handsomer, more alert than she had seen him look for months past. There was a general trimness about his appearance which suggested the ex-Papal officer. He

brushed a speck of dust carefully from off his white immaculate cuff ; while Borgia was speaking he smiled agreeably ; he watched his own reflection in the small tarnished square of looking-glass which ornamented the back of the chiffoniere at the farther end of the room.

While they were still standing in the boudoir, one of the servants who had accompanied his master to Rome entered the room rather hurriedly. He spoke to Cesco :

“ *Scusi*, Signor Conte. I pray for a thousand pardons ; but the little parcel which the Signora Cardella put into the carriage——”

“ That will do. It’s all right ; I have it,” Cesco said, speaking impatiently. The groom disappeared, and Barbara turned to her

husband with some slight gesture of surprise. “You did not tell me you had seen Regina. Is she in Rome? How is she?” she asked in her clear candid voice. It was Borgia who answered.

“I met him there,” looking over at Lalli. “I have known Cardella for years. He is *deputato* from my part of the country. They are just leaving Rome. I went there to pay my respects to the signora and the baby. She is well. She is beautiful, *diamine!*—more beautiful than ever!”

“Ah,” said Barbara, just letting her eyes rest upon him for an instant, and then looking pointedly away. She felt confirmed in her old impression that some unavowed sentiment existed between this man and her husband’s cousin, and there was something

peculiarly distasteful to her in knowing any details of his private life. It seemed hard enough that she should be called upon in any way to recognise his existence.

But she said nothing of this to her husband when they were alone together before dinner. She felt that worst, most paralysing fear of all—the dread lest she might furnish him with the opportunity of doing or saying something past forgiveness. So that when he remarked : “I am afraid you do not like having Borgia in the house. But the fact is, I needed him. He is useful to me—about business,” she only said quietly : “I am glad if he can be of any assistance to you.” She had long ago given up expecting that Cesco’s past protestations could be any indications of what he meant to do now.

“You know we have always been great friends,” Lalli added more insistingly. And then, as his wife continued to be silent, he strolled over to where she was standing by the window, and half put his arm about her waist. “He is very easily offended — Borgia. And I particularly wish him kept in a good humour just now. He is—useful to me.”

She still made no answer, and his brow darkened perceptibly. The lines about his mouth began to harden. It required a distinct effort on his part to say in a conciliatory voice : “I remember our discussing this very point one day before our marriage. You said then that you had no wish to come between me and my old companions. But perhaps you have forgotten.”

She could have shown him the very spot in which the words he quoted had been spoken. But now she contented herself with answering : “ I will do all I can to make Cavaliere Borgia comfortable, and his visit here—pleasant. Since you wish it.” And after a moment she added : “ Is he likely to stay long ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t know,” said Lalli carelessly, letting his arm fall, and thrusting his hands into his pockets. “ A day, two days, three days ; I did not ask him for any particular length of time.”

Presently he added, with determined carelessness : “ By-the-way, I saw your father in town. He has returned from Siena. And I had some conversation with him.”

“Dear papa! How is he? How is he looking?” Barbara asked, turning away from the window, and walking back into the room.

“Oh, he is well enough; you need not concern yourself about that. He is quite well enough to look after his own comfort,” Lalli said in a tone of biting irony. He was evidently referring to something which had taken place. But he offered no further explanation. He had his reasons for not continuing the subject.

After dinner the two men sat down to cards in the little boudoir. All through dinner Barbara had been aware of the increasing likeness of manner between Borgia and her husband. It seemed as if the very points of character which the

cavaliere had selected to copy were becoming dominant in Lalli's nature. And now, as they sat together with the light of the candles upon their faces, she even fancied that she could detect a certain similarity of expression between them.

It was a hot still night. For a long while the only sound in the room was an occasional brief word from one of the players. At last Borgia looked up with a petulant exclamation.

“*Perdio!* this is too much! It is luck in cards and love as well!” he said angrily, standing up and pouring himself out another glass of wine. And then turning with rather a foolish laugh to Barbara: “The signora contessa must excuse me. It is only natural to envy Cesco.”

“Ah!” said Lalli, smiling imperceptibly, and shuffling together the cards.

“But I fear for you the draught from this open window. The season of fever approaches. If you would but allow me to close——”

“Thank you. I am just going away,” said Barbara, rising immediately.

She passed out into the hall ; the windows were all closed and barred. She hesitated a moment and then turned and opened the door of the disused drawing-room. At the farther end a glass door opened out upon a small iron balcony and a narrow flight of stairs leading into the garden. Barbara stepped out upon the balcony.

Her first sensation was one of extreme relief. It was enough for a time to stand

here motionless, feeling the wind blow in her face, and looking out at the clear serene darkness of the summer night. But presently the desire for change—any change—which had brought her here, grew stronger. She caught up a light wrap which was lying on the back of a chair and twisted it about her neck, and passed down the narrow iron staircase. She moved forward a few steps uncertainly. She entered the little plantation of young beech-trees which encircled the house. The wind struck the branches softly against each other; there was no rustle of leaves, only the light tapping of the wood grown dry with the great heat. It was a very still night. The very brook seemed hushed; swollen at this point by the intersection of another water-course, it glided

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past, dark, wide, silent ; only by the moister air, by the odour of wild mint, by the bitter smell of the water-plants crushed beneath her feet, could she know of its nearness. At the far edge of the wood the trees grew smaller. She came out upon the open fields. Close at her feet, the tall wheat bent and rustled ; farther yet the low rounded hills lay bare beneath the clear darkness of the night. The wind was cool ; she passed her hands over her face, and the freshness of her skin felt unfamiliar. It was like touching some other person.

She sat down at the foot of a tree by the edge of the thicket, and little by little her ear grew accustomed to the apparent stillness, as her eye had grown accustomed to the dark. She began to detect very faint far-off sounds,

the thin bark of a dog in some distant farm-yard ; the plaintive cry of some wild creature from the hills, and all manner of small creepings and stirrings in the wood and in the wheat.

In this part of the Campagna, where the land is fertile, it is possible to ride for miles without passing a sign of human habitation. Here are no shepherds ; in time of harvest, troops of labourers descend from the mountain villages. The fields belong, for the most part, to the great landed proprietors, to the Borghese, the Torlonias, the Pallavicini, and are let by them to various *mercanti di campagna* living in Rome. It is a peaceful, lonely country. At other points—in the great breeding farms, for instance—there are watchmen riding about all through

the night, silent muffled figures, riding in pairs, armed with long shining carbines, mounted on strong unkempt horses ; men scant of speech and suspicious of danger. But here, after nightfall, there is never a step or voice to break the vast tranquillity of the fields.

The melancholy, puissant charm of the summer night had fallen upon Barbara ; her soul was tranquillised, her spirit liberated. Thought surrendered to emotion ; her life, too, became absorbed, a part of all that hushed, expectant nature ; expectant, for, as she turned again towards the house, the late moon was rising above a gap in the low rounded hills, rising divinely flushed and fair, as Diana may have looked in some far-off night upon the grassy top of Latmos.

And now the solitude had found its voice, and far and near the short plaintive cry of the civetta owls called and answered across the lonely meadows.

Barbara had not the courage to return to the house ; she wandered to and fro in the garden, among the leafy bushes of syringa. One by one she saw the lights going out in the windows ; at last there was only one lamp left burning, in the room where Borgia and her husband were still sitting over their cards.

When she did enter Lalli glanced up sharply as if about to speak ; then his face changed. He looked at his wife, but said nothing. The room was full of the smoke of cigars ; the windows were closed, the candles had burnt down almost to their sockets.

“I began to fear that the signora contessa had deserted us entirely,” said Borgia, smiling agreeably, and looking up from his game.

“You abandoned us early, my dear,” Lalli added curtly. He had never spoken to her with so little pretence of affection in his tone before. Barbara was startled.

“I did not mean to be long away. I was walking; and it is cooler in the garden,” she said gently, looking anxiously at her husband. She sat down near him. Presently a card fell from the table; she stooped to pick it up, and as she gave it to him their hands met, but he kept his eyes resolutely turned aside. The days were distant indeed when such an accidental contact would have had power to waken

all the tenderness of his nature—those early days, when life in common was nothing less than a succession of endearing experiences, falling with the unheeded loveliness of the early shadows in a wood.

She sat quite silent for several moments, watching the motion of his strong, determined-looking hands. He had a new ring on one of his fingers she noticed. Borgia turned his bright dark eyes inquiringly towards her once or twice, but no one spoke.

She began to realise that she had never known what utter helplessness was like before.

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END OF VOL. II.









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